

HEART AND CROSS.

BY

MRS. OLIPHANT.

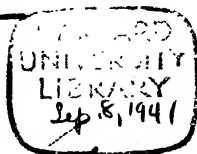
AUTHOR OF "MARGARET MATTLAND," "ADAM GRAEME," "THE LAST OF THE
MORTIMERS," "THE LAIRD OF MORLAW," ETC., ETC.

IN ONE VOLUME.

NEW YORK:
JAMES G. GREGORY.

1863.

KP 832



HEART AND CROSS.



CHAPTER I.

I know no reason why I should begin my story of the fortunes of the Harleys by a description of my own son. Perhaps it is just because there is no reason whatever that I feel so much disposed to do it—also because the appearance of that son is the only difference that has come to my own life since last my unknown friends heard of me, and because there is quite an exhilaration in thinking that here is a new audience to whom I am at liberty to introduce the second Derwent Crofton. This story is not in the least about my boy, and, in consequence, it is quite an unusual delight to be able to drag him in head and shoulders. Women are not logical, as everybody knows.

My son, then, is, at the present writing, exactly

seven years old. He is a little athlete—straight and strong. We have often explained to ourselves that it is in consequence of his having got over the baby period of existence sooner than most children do, that he is not quite so plump, as, for example, that red and white heir of the Sedgwicks, who has a succession of rosy cushions on all the points where there should be angles of his small frame. Derwent, I confess, has corners about him—but then what limbs! what color! what hard, consistent stuff the little rogue is made of! And I am not quite sure that I entirely approve of these fat children—not when they are past the baby-age. I will not delude myself, nor anybody else, into the idea that the boy is very clever. Truth to speak, he has not taken very kindly as yet to book-learning; but then does not everybody remember that it is the dunces who grow into great men? Neither is he in the slightest degree meditative or thoughtful, nor what you would call an interesting child. He has as many scars upon him as a warrior, and has been bumped and bruised in all directions. At first the child's misfortunes somewhat alarmed me, but by this time I am hardened to their daily occurrence, and no longer grow pale when I am informed that Master Derwent has broken his head or got a bad fall. This

peculiarity is one in which his father rather rejoices. I hear Mr. Crofton sometimes privately communicating to his especial friends the particulars of little Derwent's accidents: "He was certainly born to knock about the world, that boy of mine. Such a fellow was never intended to take peaceable possession of Hilfont, and settle down a calm country gentleman," says Derwent, with a chuckle. And even when once or twice in the child's life my husband's fears have been really excited about some misadventure greater than usual, there has always been visible to me a certain gleam of complacency and pride in his fear. For already he sees in the boy, whom I am half disposed to keep a baby as long as possible, a man—the heir of his own personal qualities as well as his land.

Little Derwent, however, has none of the sentimental qualities, which might be expected from an only child. He has indemnified himself in the oddest fashion for the want of those nursery friendships which sweeten the beginning of life. In the oddest fashion! I am almost ashamed to confess—I admit it with natural blushes and hesitation—that this little boy of ours is the most inveterate gossip that ever was born! Yes, there is no use disguising the fact, gossiping, plain, naked, and unsophisticated, is the special faculty

of Derwent. He has all the natural childish thirst for a story, but he prefers to have his stories warm from the lips of the heroes and heroines of the same; and somehow everybody to whom he has access confides in the child. He goes through every corner of Hilfont, from cellar to attic, with his bold, quick step, and his bright, curious eyes, interested about every individual under the roof. Too young to feel any of those sentiments which detract from the value of a sympathizer—without either the condescension of a superior or the self-comparison of an equal—I find nobody who is not pleased and comforted by the child's warm interest in their concerns; pleased and half amused as well—till, by habit, housekeeper and nurse, kitchenmaid and groom—for any efforts I might once have made to keep Derwent a proper little boy, circulating only in an orthodox round between the drawing-room and the nursery, have proved so totally fruitless, that I have given up the endeavor—repose a flattered but perfectly sincere confidence in their master's little son. Nor is the village at all stoical to his attractions. He drops in at all the cottages as if he were the curate or the parish doctor—asks questions about everything—never forgets any special circumstances which may happen to have been told him—knows all about

the old women's marriages and the number of their children, and which one's son has been wild and 'listed, and which one's daughter is at service in Simonborough. He is ready for as many fairy tales as anybody will tell him; but nothing is so thoroughly interesting to Derwent as the people round about him and their homely lives. I began by being a little shocked at this propensity of his—then gradually grew amused at it—then tried my utmost to restrain that deep inquisitiveness which seemed inherent in him—and at last have come to accept it quietly as the child's peculiarity, a part of himself. If the best object for the study of mankind is man, Derwent will, perhaps, some day turn out a great philosopher. At present he is the most sincere and simple-minded of little gossips, pursuing his favorite branch of knowledge boldly, without any compunctions; such is the most distinct and remarkable characteristic of my son.

And only to imagine the difference which that pair of blue eyes has wrought in our great house and our calm life! My husband and I were, to be sure, "very happy," as people say, before; as happy as two people can make each other, by a hearty and sincere love and cordial union; the climax of happiness we would have thought it, each in our separate thoughts, when we lived

lonely lives apart. But love, which makes labor sweet and life pleasant, does not answer for daily bread—never does, let the romancers say what they will; no—not even to women. The heart within me was dissatisfied even with Derwent—I could not content myself with that life we lived—that calm, happy, tranquil life, which knew no burdens, and if it overflowed in courtesies and charities, which cost us nothing, was thought a model existence by our hard-working neighbors.

By dint of perpetual pin-pricks and unceasing agitation, I had managed to drive Derwent into Parliament, where he somewhat solaced me by his intense affliction and sufferings during the season of Parliamentary martyrdom, and was himself happier during the rest of the year in the relief of escaping that treadmill; but the content that had fluttered off from my heart, when I had only my husband and myself to think of, came with a flash of magic in the train of the little heir. All life glowed and brightened up with a different interest—there were no longer only ourselves who had attained all that was attainable in our own mature and settled existence; but this new living, loving creature, with all the possibilities of life burning upon his fresh horizon. The picture changed as if by enchantment; the

master and mistress of that tranquil great house—lone, happy people set apart, none of the changes of life coming near them, living for themselves, changed into a father and mother, linked by sweet ties of succession to the other generations of the world; belonging not to ourselves, but to the past and the future—to the coming age, which *he* should influence—to the former age, which had hailed *our* entrance as we hailed *his*. One cannot be content with the footbreadth of human soil that supports one's own weight—one must thrust out one's hands before and behind. I felt that we fell into our due place in the world's generations, and laid hold upon the lineal chain of humanity when little Derwent went forth before us, trusted to our guidance—the next generation—the Future to us, as to the world.

CHAPTER II.

"I suppose, Clare," said Mr. Crofton to me one morning at breakfast, "that Alice Harley has made up her mind, like somebody I once knew, to live for other people, and on no account to permit herself to be married—is it so?"

"I really cannot undertake to say whether she is like that person you once knew," said I, somewhat demurely. I had some hopes that she was—I was much inclined to imagine that it was a youthful prepossession, of which, perhaps, she herself was unaware, that kept Alice Harley an unmarried woman; but of course I was not going to say so even to Derwent, who, with all his good qualities, was after all only a man. An unmarried woman!—that I should call my pretty Alice by that harsh, mature, common-place name! But I am sorry to say the appellation was quite a just one. She was nearer eight and twenty than eighteen, now-a-days; she had no love, no engagement, no sentimental gossip at all to be made about her. I will not undertake to say

that she had not some ideas of another kind, with which I had but a very limited sympathy—but an unmarried woman Alice Harley was, and called herself—with (I thought) a little quiet secret interest, which she deeply resented any suspicion of, in Indian military affairs.

“Because,” said Derwent, with the old affectionate laugh, and glance of old love-triumph over his old wife, which he never outgrew or exhausted, “there is that very good fellow, our new Rector, would give his ears for such a wife—and from all I can see, would suit her famously; which, by the way, Clare, now that her mother is so dependent on her, is not what every man would. You should say a good word for Reredos—it is your duty to look after your protégée’s establishment in life.”

I confess when Derwent said these words a great temptation came to me. It suddenly flashed upon my mind that Alice in the Rectory would be my nearest neighbor, and the most pleasant of possible companions. At the same moment, and in the light of that momentary selfish illumination, it also became suddenly visible to me that my dear girl had a great many notions which I rather disapproved of, and was rapidly confirming herself in that rôle of unmarried woman, which, having once rather taken to

it myself, I knew the temptations of. Mr. Reredos was only about five years older than herself, good-looking, well-connected, with a tolerably good living, and a little fortune of his own. And how could I tell whether my private designs would ever come to anything? Derwent, simple-minded man, had not fallen on so potent an argument for many a day before.

"Mamma," said little Derwent, who heard everything without listening, "the housekeeper at the Rectory has a son in the Guards—like the men in the steel-coats that you showed me when we went to London; the other sons are all comfortable, she says; but this one, when she speaks of *him*, she puts up her apron to her eyes. Mamma, I want to know if it is wicked to go for a soldier—Sally Yeoman's son 'listed last year, and *she* puts up her apron to her eyes. Now, my cousin Bertie is in India—was it wicked in him to go for a soldier?—or what's the good of people being sad when people 'list?—eh, mamma?"

"Did you ever see anybody sad about your cousin Bertie?" said I, with a sudden revulsion of feeling and the profoundest interest.

"N—no," said little Derwent. He applied himself after that devoutly to his bread and jam—there was something not altogether assured in

the sound of that "N—no." Derwent could not help having quick eyes—but the child knew sometimes that it was best to hold his tongue.

"I should like to know," said Derwent the elder, laughing, "why Mr. Reredos's housekeeper's son in the Guards has been dragged headlong into this consultation. Suppose you go for a soldier yourself, Derwie. There's your drum in the corner. I have something to say to mamma."

Little Derwent marched off, obedient, if not very willing. His inquisitive tendencies did not carry him beyond that rule of obedience which was the only restraint I put upon the boy. Derwent, elder, followed him with happy looks. He only came back to his subject after an interval of pleased and silent observation when there suddenly fell into the stillness of our cheerful breakfast-room the first thunder of Derwie's drum.

"What an inquisitive little imp it is!" said Derwent; "but in spite of the housekeeper's son in the Guards, I don't think you could do a more charitable action, Clare, than to support Reredos's suit to Alice Harley. Such a famous thing for both—and such an excellent neighbor for yourself."

"That is very true," said I; "but still I cannot help building something upon that son in the Guards."

Mr. Crofton looked up somewhat puzzled, with a smile upon his lips. I daresay he asked, "What on earth do you mean?" somewhat exasperated at the repetition; but Derwie's drum filled all the apartment at the moment, and of course I could not hear, much less answer him. We had some further talk on the subject later, when Derwent called me into the library to read over that speech of his, which he made a few evenings before at Simonborough, and which the Editor of the Simonborough Chronicle had sent over in proof to ask if my husband would kindly glance over it and see if it was correct. Mr. Redos was coming to dinner to meet the Harleys, among other people—and Mr. Crofton, always good-humored, and disposed to aid and abet all honest love affairs, could not sufficiently point out the advantages of such a connection to me.

And I said no more to perplex him, of the son in the Guards; but for myself remembered that mythical personage, whatever was said to me on the subject; and appreciated with the highest admiration that singularly delicate line of association which suggested the reference to little Derwie's mind and thoughts. Yes, to be sure! the old women will put up their aprons to their eyes when they talk about the son who has

'listed; the young women will keep a shadowy corner in their hearts for that unfortunate—and yet it is not wicked to go for a soldier. I felt Mr. Reredos's handsome figure quite blotted out by the suggestion conveyed in that of his housekeeper's son. When I had finished my housekeeping affairs, and given orders about the visitors we expected for Easter—this I should have said was the Easter recess, the glimpse of spring at Hilfont, which was all we could catch now that Derwent, to his great affliction, was a Parliament man—I took my seat in the great cheerful window of that room where we had breakfasted, and which overlooked half the country. Far away in the distance the sun caught the spires and roofs of Simonborough, with its cathedral faintly shining out from among the lower level of the housetops, and nearer at hand struck bright upon the slow and timid river which wound through the fields down below us, at the bottom of this great broad slope of country, which had no pretensions to be a hill, though its advantage of altitude in our level district was greater than that of many an elevation twice or three times as high. Spring was stealing into the long drooping branches of those willows which marked the irregular line of the stream. Spring brightened with doubtful, wavering dewy

smiles over all the surface of the country. I remember when I should have been glad to turn my eyes indoors, away from the sweet suggestions of Nature conveyed by that sweetest and most suggestive season; but I took the fullest and freest enjoyment of it now; rather, I sat at the window calmly pleased and unconscious, as we are when we are happy, feeling no contrast to wound me between the world without and the world within—and considered fully the circumstances of Alice Harley, and how I ought to forward, as Derwent said, my dear girl's establishment in life.

Now I have to confess that many years before this I had formed my own plans for Alice—had quite made up my mind, indeed, to a secret scheme of match-making in which at the moment I had been grievously disappointed. At that time, when little Derwie was undreamt of, and I had prematurely made up my mind to a childless life, I had settled my inheritance of Estcourt upon my young cousin Bertie Nugent, with a strong hope that the boy, who had known her for so many years, would naturally prefer my pretty Alice to all strangers, when his good fortune and affectionate heart put marriage into his head. This did not turn out the case, however. Bertie made his choice otherwise, was

disappointed, and went off to India, where for eight long years he had remained. Sometimes, when he wrote to me, I found a message of good wishes to his old playmates at the very end of the page; once or twice it had occurred to him to ask, "Is not Alice Harley married?" but the question seemed to proceed rather from surprise and curiosity than any tender interest. It is impossible to imagine a greater separation than there was between these two. Bertie, now Captain Herbert Nugent, at a remote station in the Bengal Presidency, where, scattered over that vast, arid country, he had friends, brothers, and cousins by the dozen; and Alice, with her new-fangled notions, and staid single-woman dignity, hid away in the depths of a quiet English home, where she addressed herself to her duty and the education of her little sisters and eschewed society. Whether any secret thoughts of each other lingered in their minds nobody of course could tell; but they certainly had not, except in my persistent thoughts, a single bond of external connection. So long as they were both unmarried, I could not help putting them together with an imagination which longed for the power of giving efficacy to its dreams; but nobody else had ever done so—there were thousands of miles of land and water dividing them—many long

years, and most likely a world of dissimilar dispositions, experiences and thoughts.

While on the other hand Mr. Reredos was actually present on the scene, in a pretty Rectory just half a mile from my own house, and not a dozen miles from Mrs. Harley's cottage. The young clergyman lost no opportunity of doing his duty towards that lady, though her dwelling was certainly in another parish—and showed himself so far disposed towards Alice's new-fangled notions as to preach a sermon upon the changed position and new duties of Woman, on the occasion of her last visit to Hilfont. I trust it edified Alice, for it had rather a contrary effect upon myself, and filled the parishioners generally with the wildest amazement. Most people are flattered by such an adoption of their own opinions—and a young woman aged twenty-seven, thinking herself very old, and trying hard to make every one else believe the same, is especially open to such a compliment. Besides, I could not say anything even to myself against Mr. Reredos. He was well-bred, well-looking, and well-dispositioned—the match would be particularly suitable in every way. Dr. Harley's daughter, had her father and his fortune survived till the present day, would still have made quite a sensible marriage in accepting the Rector of Hil-

font. And then the advantage of having her so near!

I sat in the great window of the breakfast-room, looking over half the county. If I had been a woman of elevated mind or enlightened views, I should have been thinking of all the human wishes and disappointments that lay beneath my eyes, each one under its own roof and its own retirement. But, on the contrary, I observed nothing but a small figure on a small pony ascending the road from the village. In the same way I ought to have been benevolently glad that our excellent young Rector had inclined his eyes and heart towards my own favorite and friend—the friend and favorite now of so many years—and that a home so suitable, at once to her origin and her tastes, awaited the acceptance of Alice. But I was not glad—I sent my thoughts ever so far away to Bertie's bungalow, and felt aggrieved and disappointed for the boy who, alas! was a boy no longer, and most likely, instead of feeling aggrieved on his own account, would have nothing but his warmest congratulations to send when he heard of his old playmate's marriage. Things are very perverse and unmanageable in this world. The right people will not draw together, let one wish it ever so strongly, whereas the wrong people are always approaching each

other in eccentric circles, eluding every obstacle which one can place in their way. I could not be very melancholy on the subject, because the pony and its little rider came every moment nearer, and brightened the face of the earth to my eyes—but still it was in the highest degree provoking. If it ever came to anything! There was still that escape from this perplexing matter; for whether I felt disposed to support his suit or not, it was still by no means certain, even when Mr. Reredos had finally declared himself, what Alice Harley might say.

CHAPTER III.

"WHO are we to have, Clare?—let us hear. You don't suppose that my mind, weighed down with the responsibilities of law-making, can remember everything, eh?—even my wife's guests?" said Derwent, rubbing his hands, as we sat after dinner near the fire in the warm crimson dining-room. When we were alone I gave Mr. Crofton's claret my benign countenance till he was ready to go with me to the drawing-room. There were not enough of us to separate at that genial hour, especially as little Derwent sat between us peeling his orange, and quite ready to give his opinion on any knotty point that might occur.

"Papa, please give Willie Sedgwick the little grey pony," said Derwie, "to ride when he's here; he says his papa will never let him take his horse anywhere with him—there's such a lot of children," added my boy, parenthetically, with some pity and contempt. "I like little Clary best—I like her because her name's the same as mamma's, and because she has blue eyes, and because she

likes me, and she's good to that poor old nurse, too, who has her daughter in a fever, and daren't go to see her."

"How do you know about the nurse's daughter's fever, Derwie?" asked I.

"Mamma, they sent *me* to the nursery, when you were calling there," said Derwie, with some emphasis, "and she told me she has the scarlet fever, and Mrs. Sedgwick won't let her mamma go to see her, for fear of the children taking it—isn't it a shame? Clary told me she said her prayers for her every night, to get her well; and so," said Derwent, coloring, and looking up with some apparent idea that this was not perfectly right, and the most manful intention to stand out the consequences, "and so do I."

His father and I looked at each other, and neither of us said anything just for that moment, which silence emboldened Derwie to believe that no harm was coming of his confession, and to go on with his story.

"And Mr. Sedgwick's man—he's such a funny fellow. I wish you'd ask him to tell you one of his stories, mamma," said Derwie, "for I know he's coming here with them. He has a brother like Johnny Harley—just as lame—and he got cured in Wales, at St. Winifred's Well. Why don't you ask Mrs. Harley to send Johnny to

St. Winifred's Well, mamma?—she only laughed at me when I said so. I say, mamma," continued Derwie, with his mouth full of his orange, "I'll tell Russell he's to tell you one of his stories—I never knew a fellow that could tell such famous stories—I wish you had a man like Russell, papa. He's been all over the world, and he's got two children at home, and the name of one of them is John—John Russell—like the little gentleman in *Punch*."

"Don't be personal, Derwie," said Mr. Crofton, laughing; "we are to have Mr. Sedgwick's Russell, and Mrs. Sedgwick's nurse—who else?"

"The Harleys," said I, "for we'll postpone for a little, if you please, Derwie, your friends below-stairs; and Mr. Reredos and his sister, and Miss Polly Greenfield, and her little nieces. I fear the womankind will rather predominate in our Easter party—though Maurice Harley, to be sure"——

"Yes—Maurice Harley, to be sure," said Derwent, still with a smile, "is—what should you call him now, Clare—a host in himself?"

"Fellow of Exeter College, Cambridge," said I, demurely; "he has it on his card."

"Mamma, is Maurice Harley a clergyman?—shouldn't a clergyman care about people?" said

little Derwent; "I don't think *he* does. He likes books."

"And what do you mean by people?—and don't you like books?" I asked.

"Oh! yes, sometimes," said my son; "when there's pictures in them. But *you* know what people mean, mamma—quite well! You talk to them, *you* do—but Maurice Harley puts up his shoulders like this, and looks more tired than Bob Dawkes does after his ploughing—so tired—just as if he could drop down with tiredness. Oh!" cried Derwent, with a sudden burst of enthusiasm, "I would not give our Johnnie for a hundred of *him*."

"A hundred of *him*!" I confess the thought filled me with alarm. In my heart I doubted, with a little shudder of apprehension, whether the country, not to speak of Hilfont, could have survived the invasion of a hundred such accomplished men. "But, Derwie," said I, recovering from that shock, "if you do not like books except when they have pictures in them, how do you think you are ever to learn all the things that Maurice Harley knows?"

"Mr. Sedgwick says he's a prig," says little Derwent, with great seriousness, "and I know more things now than he does—I know how to make rabbits' houses. If you were to get some

little white rabbits, mamma, I could make a beautiful house for them. Will Morris taught me how. Oh! papa, don't you know Will Morris wants to marry little Susan at the shop?—he has her picture, and it's not the least like her, and I heard Maurice Harley say the photographs *must* be like, because the sun took them. Does the sun see better than other people? That one's like you with the paper in your hand; but Will Morris's picture, instead of being Susan, is anybody in a checked dress."

"I begin to think you will turn out a great critic, Derwic," said his admiring father, who desired no better than to spend his after-dinner hour listening to the wisdom of his son.

"What's a critic? is it anything like a prig?" asked Derwent, who was trying hard to set up the crooked stem of a bunch of raisins—now, alas, denuded of every vestige of its fruit—like a tree upon his plate; the endeavor was not very successful, although when propped up on each side by little mounds of orange-peel, the mimic tree managed to hold a very slippery and precarious footing, and for a few minutes kept itself upright. We two sat looking at this process in a hush of pleased and interested observation. Maurice Harley, with all his powers and pretensions, could neither have done nor said anything

which could thus have absorbed us, and I doubt whether we would have looked at the highest triumphs of art or genius with admiration as complete as that with which we regarded little Derwie setting up the stalk of the bunch of raisins between these little mounds of orange-peel.

"Clare, how old is he now?" said Mr. Crofton to me.

As if he did not know! but I answered with calm pride, "Seven on Monday, Derwent—and you remember it was Easter Monday too that year—and tall for his age, certainly—but he is not so stout as Willie Sedgwick."

"Ah, Monday's your birthday, is it, old fellow?" said Derwent; "what should you like on your birthday, Derwie—let us hear?"

"May I have anything I like, papa?" asked the child, throwing down immediately both the raisin-stalk and the orange-skin. His father nodded in assent. I, a little in terror of what "anything I like" at seven years old might happen to be, hastened to interpose.

"Anything in reason, Derwie, dear—not the moon, you know, nor the crown, nor an impossible thing. You are a very sensible little boy when you please; think of something in papa's power."

"It is only little babies that cry for the moon,"

said Derwie, contemptuously, "and I've got it in the stereoscope—and what's the good of it if one had it? nobody lives there; but, papa, I'll tell you what I should like—give me the key of the door of the House of Commons, where you go every day when we are in town. That's what I should like for my birthday; what makes you laugh?" continued my boy, coming to a sudden pause and growing red, for he was deeply susceptible to ridicule, bold as he was.

"Why on earth do you want to go to the House of Commons?" cried his father, when his laughter permitted him to speak.

"It's in the Bible that the people used to come to tell everything to the king," said Derwie, a little peevishly; "and isn't the House of Commons instead of the king in this country? and doesn't everybody go to the House of Commons when they want anything? I should like to see them all coming and telling their stories—what fun it must be! That's why you go there, I suppose, every night? but I don't know why you never should take mamma or me."

"It would never do to let the ladies come in," said Derwent, with mock seriousness; "you know they would talk so much that we could never hear what the people had to say."

"Mamma does not talk very much," said Der-

wie, sharply ; “nor Alice either. Old Mrs. Sedgwick, to be sure—but then it’s some good when she talks ; it isn’t all about books or things I can’t understand, it’s about people—that’s real talk, that is. Before I go to school—just till this session is over—oh, papa, will you give me that key ?”

“My boy,” said Derwent, with the love and the laughter rivalling each other in his eyes, “they don’t give me any key, or you should have it—there’s a turnkey at the door, who opens it to let the poor people out and in ; but some day you and mamma shall go and be shut up in a cage we have for the ladies, and hear all that’s said. I’m afraid, Derwie, when you’ve once been there you won’t want to go again.”

“Yes, I shall !” cried Derwie, all his face glowing with eagerness ; when there suddenly appeared a solemn and silent apparition at the door, namely Nurse, under whose iron rule the young gentleman, much resisting, was still held, so far at least as his toilette was concerned. That excellent woman said not a word. She opened the door with noiseless solemnity, came in, and stood smoothing down her spotless apron by the wall. No need for words to announce the presence of that messenger of fate ; Derwie made some unavailing struggles with destiny, and at

last resigned himself and marched off defiantly, followed by the mighty Nemesis. When the door closed upon the well-preserved skirts of that brown silk gown, in which, ever since little Derwie emerged from babyhood, nurse had presented herself in the dining-room to fetch him to bed, Mr. Crofton and I once more looked at each other with those looks of fondness and praise and mutual congratulation which our boy had brought to our eyes. We had already exhausted all the phrases of parental wonder and admiration; we only looked at each other with a mutual tender delight and congratulation. Nobody else, surely, since the beginning of the world, ever had such a boy!

CHAPTER IV.

THE next day after, being the Saturday, our little Easter party assembled; first our neighbors the Sedgwicks, who were a party in themselves. Ten years before, Hugh Sedgwick had been the finest gentleman in our neighborhood, which he filled with amazement and consternation when he chose to fall in love with and marry little Clara Harley, whom, in the most literal sense of the word, he married out of the school-room, and who was just seventeen years old. But now that five children had followed this marriage, nobody could have supposed or believed in the existence of any such great original contrast between the husband and wife. Either Mr. Sedgwick had grown younger, or Clara older, than their years. He who now called Maurice Harley a prig, had been himself the prince of prigs—according to the estimate of the country gentlemen, his neighbors—in his day; but that day was long departed. Hugh Sedgwick, fastidious, dilettante fine gentleman, as he had been, was now the

solicitous father of little children, and not above giving very sound advice upon measles and whooping-cough—while Clara, who had gradually blossomed out into fuller and fuller bloom, had scarcely yet attained the height of her soft beauty, despite the little flock of children round her. Nobody in the county made such a toilette as little Mrs. Sedgwick. I suspect she must have had *carte blanche* as to her milliner's bills; and when they entered the Hilfont drawing-room, Clara, with her pretty matronly self-possession, her graceful little figure, round and full as one of her own babies, and her lovely little face, with all its cloudless lilies and roses—nobody could have believed in the time when his good neighbors shrugged their shoulders and laughed at Hugh Sedgwick's choice. She sat down, I remember, by Miss Polly Greenfield—dear old Miss Polly in her primeval drapery—that crimson satin gown which I had known all my life. Such a contrast they made in the bright youth and pale age of the two faces, which came together lovingly in a kiss of greeting! Since her brother, Sir Willoughby, had married, Miss Polly's habits had changed greatly. She had thrown aside her old brown riding-dress and the stiff man's hat she used to wear when she rode with Sir Willoughby. And when her old horse and

her old groom were old enough to be pensioned off in their respective paddock and cottage, Miss Polly set up a pony-carriage, more suitable to her years. Her niece, a young widow of twenty, a poor, little, disconsolate soul, who was all the trouble in the world to Miss Polly, had made a second marriage, and left her two little children to the care of their grandaunt. They were little girls both, and the tender old woman was very happy in their society—happier a hundred times than when she had been mistress of Fenosier Hall. But to hear how little Clara, who once had stood somewhat in awe of Miss Polly, talked to her now!—advising her how to manage little Di and Emmy, telling how she regulated her own Clary, who, though a good deal younger, was very far on for her age—with what a sweet touch of superiority and simplicity the dear little matron looked down from her wifely and motherly elevation upon pale old Miss Polly, who was neither mother nor wife! Clara was quite ready at the same moment to have bestowed her matronly counsels upon me.

After the Sedgwicks, Alice Harley, all by herself, as became one who felt herself at home, and was all but a daughter of the house, came into the room. Alice was plain in her dress to the extreme of plainness. That she assumed an

evening dress at all was somewhat against her convictions, and in compassion to my weakness and prejudice; but the dress was of dark colored silk, made with a studied sobriety of cut, and lack of ornament. Instead of sharing Clara's round soft loveliness, Alice had grown slender and pale. Unimaginative people called her thin. Out of her girlish beauty had come a face full of thoughtfulness and expression, but not so pretty as some people expected—perhaps, because somehow or other, the ordinary roselight of youth had failed to Alice. Half by choice, half by necessity, she had settled down into the humdrum useful existence which the eldest daughter of a large family, if she does not elude her fate by an early marriage, so often falls into. Various "offers" had been made to her, one of which Mrs. Harley, divided between a mother's natural wish to see her daughter properly "settled," and a little reluctance, not less natural, to part with her own household counsellor and helper, had given a wavering support to. Alice, however, said No, coldly, and not, as I thought, without the minutest possible tinge of bitterness answered the persuasions which were addressed to her. She was rather high and grandiloquent altogether on the subject of marriage, looking on with a half-comic, disapproving spectator observation at

little Clara's loving tricks to her husband, whom that little matron had no awe of now-a-days, and discoursing more than seemed to me entirely necessary upon the subject. Alice was somewhat inclined to the views of those philosophers (chiefly feminine, it must be confessed) who see in the world around them, not a general crowd of human creatures, but two distinct rows of men and women ; and she was a little condescending and superior, it must also be admitted, to that somewhat frivolous antagonistic creature, man. The ideal man, whom Alice had never—so she intimated—had the luck to light upon, was a demigod ; but the real male representatives of the race were poor creatures—well enough, to be sure, but no more worthy of a woman's devotion than of any other superlative gift. With sentiments so distinct and *prononcés*, Alice had not lived all these years without feeling some yearning for an independent sway and place of her own, as one may well suppose—which tempted her into further speculations about women's work, and what one could do to make a place for one's self, who had positively determined not to be indebted for one's position to one's husband. Such was the peculiar atmosphere out of which Alice Harley revealed herself to the common world. She was deeply scornful of that talk

about people which pleased my boy so much, and so severe upon gossip and gossips, that I had on more than one occasion seriously to defend myself. There she stood in her dark-brown silk dress beside little Clara's flowing toilette and vivacious nursery talk, casting a shadow upon pale Miss Polly in her crimson satin. Alice was as much unlike that tender old soul, with her old maidenly restraints and preciseness, her unbounded old womanly indulgence and kindness, as she was unlike her matronly younger sister; and I confess that to myself, in all her perverseness, knowing as I did what a genuine heart lay below, there was quite a charm of her own about the unmarried woman. She was so conscious of her staid and sober age, so unconscious of her pleasant youth, and the simplicity which, all unknown to herself, lay in her wisdom. Such was my Alice; the same Alice who, keeping silent and keeping her brothers and sisters quiet in the nursery, while she knew her father lay dying many a long year ago, adjured me with unspeakable childish pathos—"Oh, don't be sorry for me! I mustn't cry!"

I do not know how it was that, while I contemplated Alice on her first appearance with a kind of retrospective glance at her history, there suddenly appeared above her the head of Mr.

Reredos. He was a middle-sized, handsome man, with a pale complexion and dark hair—very gentlemanly, people said—a man who preached well, talked well, and looked well, and who, even to my eyes, which were no way partial, had no particular defect worth noticing, if it were not the soft, large, white hands without any bones in them, which held your fingers in a warm, velvety clasp when you shook hands with the new rector. I don't know how he had managed to come in without my perceiving him. And strong must have been the attraction which beguiled Mr. Reredos to neglect the duty of paying his respects to his hostess, even for five minutes. It was not five minutes, however, before he recollected himself, and came with his soft white hand and his sister on his arm. His sister was so far like himself that she was very pale, with very black hair, and an "interesting" look. She did not interest me very much; but I could not help hoping that perhaps in this sentimental heroine Maurice Harley, for the time being, might meet his fate. I thought that would be rather a comfortable way of shelving those members of our party; for Maurice, though he was a very fine gentleman, not to say Fellow of his College, afflicted my soul with a constant inclination to commit a personal as-

sault upon him, and have him whipped and sent to bed.

However, to be sure, we had all the elements of a very pleasant party about us—people who belonged to us, as one may say. Derwent, who liked to see a number of cheerful faces about him, was in the lightest spirits; he paid Clara Sedgwick compliments on her toilette, and “chaffed” (as he called it—I am not responsible for the word) Alice, whom he had the sincerest affection for, but loved to tease, and took Miss Polly in to dinner, while little Derwie did the honors of the nursery to a party almost as large, and quite as various. I fear we made rather a night of feasting than a penitential vigil of that Easter Eve.

CHAPTER V.

WHEN we returned to the drawing-room after dinner, we found, hidden in a distant corner, with books and portfolios, and stereoscopes blocking up the table near him, Johnnie Harley. I have said little of this boy. He was the proxy which the handsome, healthy family had given for their singular exemption from disease and weakness—the one sufferer, among many strong, who is so often found in households unexceptionably healthful, as if all the minor afflictions which might have been divided among them had concentrated on one and left the rest free. When Johnnie was a child he had only been moved in the little wheeled chair, got for him in his father's lifetime, when they were rich. Now he was better, and able to move about with the help of a crutch, but even now was a hopeless cripple, with only his vigorous mind and unconquerable spirits to maintain him through private hours of suffering. Partly from his infirmities—partly from his natural temperament—the lad

had a certain superficial shyness, which, though it was easily got over, made it rather difficult to form acquaintance with him. He could not be induced to dine with us that first night—but he was in the drawing-room, showing the stereoscope to Miss Polly's little nieces, Di and Emmy, when we came back from dinner; the other little creatures were playing at some recondite childish game in another part of the room; but Emmy and Di were very proper little maidens, trained to take judicious care of their white India muslin frocks, the spare dimensions of which contrasted oddly enough with Clary's voluminous little skirts and flush of ribbons. Clary was like a little rose, with lovely rounded cheeks and limbs like her mother, dimpled to the very finger-points, while Di and Emmy, though by no means deficient in good looks, were made up quite after Miss Polly's own model, in a taste which was somewhat severe for their years. Johnnie Harley veiled himself behind these little maidens till we were safely settled in the room. He was twenty, poor fellow, and did not know what was to become of him. He was sometimes very melancholy, and sometimes very gay; he was in rather a doubtful mood to-night.

"Look here, Mrs. Crofton," he said, drawing me shyly aside. "I've put this one in a fa-

mous light—do tell me if you like it. I did it myself.”

I looked, of course, to please him. It was a pretty view of my own house at Estcourt, with the orphan children who lived there playing on the terrace—very pretty, and very minute—so clear that I fancied I could recognize the children. It pleased me mightily.

“*You* did it, Johnnie,” cried I, much gratified. “I am very much pleased; but I never knew you were a ‘photographic artist’ before.”

“No more I was,” said Johnnie, who rather affected a little roughness of speech, “till they got me a camera the other day. Of course I know it was Alice, and that somehow or other she’s spared it off herself. Do you know whether there’s anything she ought to have had that she hasn’t, Mrs. Crofton? One can never find Alice out. She doesn’t go when she’s made a sacrifice for you and keep hinting and hinting to let you know, as some people do; but look here—isn’t it horrible to think I’m grown up and yet have to stay at home like a girl, and can’t do anything. Now that I’m able to do these slides, I’d give my ears if I could sell them. I’d go and stand in the market at Simonborough. But of course it’s no use speaking. Don’t you think, Mrs. Crofton, that there’s surely something in

- the world that could be done by a cripple like me?"

"I have no doubt a dozen things," said I, boldly; "but have a little patience, Johnnie. Maurice is ten years older than you are, and he does nothing that I can see. Besides, it is holiday time—I forbid you to think of anything but the new camera to-night. Is it a good one? What a pleasure it must be for all of you," I continued, looking once more into the stereoscope, where, most singular of optical delusions, I certainly saw a pretty new winter bonnet, the ℓ/back of which, in the wardrobe of Alice, I had already made a memorandum of, floating over the picture of my old house.

"Ah," said Johnnie, with a sigh, "if I were a fellow like Maurice!—but here, Di, you have not seen this," he added, transferring another slide into that wooden box. Grave little Di looked at it, and summoned her sister with a little scream of delight.

"It's Miss Harley and Baby Sedgwick," said Di, "and I do believe if any one was little enough they could go round behind her in the picture. Oh! let me tell Derwent and Clara, Mr. John!"

Mr. John was very graciously pleased to exhibit his handiwork to any number of specta-

tors, and shortly we all gathered round the stereoscope. Alice stood looking on very demurely, while we were examining her in that pretty peep-show; she listened to all the usual observations with due calm, while Johnnie, quite in a flush of pleasure, produced the pictures, at which I understood afterwards the poor youth had been working all day long, one by one out of the box.

"My love," said Miss Polly, in a mild aside, "I'd like to see you just so in a house of your own, my dear."

Alice colored slightly; very slightly—it was against her principles to blush—and made no answer, except a slight shake of her head.

"Such a sweet baby," said Miss Reredos, "I think one might bear anything for such a darling! Oh, don't you think so, Miss Harley? I think it's so unnatural for a lady not to love children. I think if dear Clement had but a family I should be so happy."

"But, dear, shouldn't you be happier," said Clara, opening her bright eyes a little wider, with a laughing humor which now-a-days that young lady permitted herself to exercise pretty freely, "if you had a family of your own?"

"Oh! Mrs. Sedgwick, how can you speak so? I am so glad the gentlemen are not here," said

the Rector's sister. Alice stood looking at her with a half vexed, half amused expression. Alice was a little afraid for the honor of (most frightful of phrases!) her sex.

"As for Alice," said Clara, laughing, "do you know she thinks it rather improper to be married? She would not allow she cared for anybody, not for the world."

"I think women ought to be very careful," said Alice, responding instantly to the challenge with a little flush and start; "I think there are very few men in the world worthy of being loved. Yes, I do think so, whatever you choose to say. They're well enough for their trades, but they're not good enough to have a woman's heart for a plaything. Of course there may be some—I do not deny that; but I never"—

Here Alice paused—perhaps she was going to tell a fib—perhaps conscience stopped her—I will not guess; but Clara clapped her hands in triumph.

"Ah, but if you did ever," said Clara, laughing, "would you marry *him*, Alice?"

"If he asked me it is very likely I should," said Alice, with great composure; "but not for a house of my own, as Miss Polly says—nor for fun, like some other people."

"My love, it's very natural to like a house of

one's own," said Miss Polly, with a little sigh. "I don't mind saying it now that I am so old : once in my life I almost think I would have married for a home—not for a living, remember, Alice—but for a place and people that should belong to me, and not to another—that's what one wishes for, you know ; but I never talked about it either now or then ; my dear, I wouldn't if I were you."

At this address Alice blushed crimson—blushed up to the hair, and patted her foot upon the ground in a very impatient, not to say angry, way. She cast a somewhat indignant side-look at me, to express her conviction that I was at the bottom of this, and had suggested the mild condemnation of Miss Polly—which, so far as agreeing thoroughly in her sentiments went, I confess I might have done. Then Alice went off abruptly to the piano, and began playing to the children, who gathered round her ; before long her voice was pleasantly audible in one of those immemorial songs with a fox or a robin for a hero, which always delight children ; and when the song was finished there ensued as pretty a scene as I have ever looked at. Clara gathered the children in a ring, which danced round and round, with a dazzle of little rosebud faces, flying white frocks and ribbons, to Alice's accompaniment. Such

scenes I have no doubt were of nightly occurrence in the big, grand drawing-room at Water-flag Hall; and little Derwie took his part so heartily, and joined in the chant with which they went round with lungs and will so unmistakable, that, for my part, I was quite captivated. Miss Polly and I sat down to watch them. Little Di, too shy and too big to join them, being twelve years old and a grandmother among these babes, stood wistfully behind us, envying Emmy, who was only ten and a half, and "not too old for such a game." Di, a long way older and graver than Mrs. Clare, stood nodding and smiling to encourage her little sister every time she whisked past. Miss Reredos behind us was examining Johnnie's pictures and talking sentiment in a soft half-whisper to that defenceless boy, while Miss Polly and I sat on a sofa together, looking on.

"It is strange," said Miss Polly, "but yet I'm sure I am very glad. I thought of asking you, Clare, whether anything had occurred to disturb that dear girl? I don't like when I hear young women talk like that, my dear—it looks to me as if they had something on their mind, you know. Once I thought there might perhaps be something between Bertie Nugent and Alice—that would have been a very nice match; but

somehow these nice matches never come about—at least, not without a deal of trouble; and I suppose it was nothing but an old woman's fancy, Clare."

"I suppose not, indeed," said I, rather ruefully, looking at that prettiest spectacle before me, and recognizing, as by intuition, that Mr. Reredos had just come in, and was standing at the door in a glow of delight and approbation, looking at Alice, and deciding not to delay his proposal for an hour longer than it should be absolutely necessary to keep silent. Ah, me! there was some hope for us in Alice's philosophical moods; but when she played to her little neices and nephews in that shockingly happy, careless, and easy manner, I was in despair.

"It's very sad when people won't see what's most for their advantage," said Miss Polly, with a ghost of humor in her pale old face. "I dare say, Clare, my dear, Bertie's just as happy. I heard from Lady Greenfield the other day—one of *her letters*, you know—that the dear boy was getting on very well, but breaking his heart to get home that he might go to the Crimea to the war."

"So he tells me," said I, "but I rather think I am very glad he has not the chance of dying on that dreadful hill."

"My dear, that's very true," said Miss Polly; "one faints at the thought of it, to be sure, for one's own; but if I could be philosophical—which—dear, dear, it isn't to be expected from an old woman! I'd say it was wrong to be sorry for the dear young creatures, God bless them! Think what they're spared, my dear child. I don't know but what it's a great saving of the labor and the sorrow when they die young."

"Miss Polly, this is not like you," I cried in surprise.

"Perhaps it isn't; but, dear, we're always learning something," said Miss Polly; "there's Elinor now, and poor Emmy, the unfortunate little soul! but hush, here's your new rector coming—I'll tell you another time."

CHAPTER VI.

"I AM surprised," said Mr. Reredos, as he drank his coffee beside me, "to hear from Mr. Maurice Harley that he's not in orders. I really felt so sure that he must be that I did not think of asking. He's had his fellowship this long time, has not he? and really a clergyman's son, and with the excellent connections he has—I am surprised!"

"Ah, so is everybody," said Miss Polly, significantly. Miss Polly was an old-fashioned woman, and had little sympathy with those delicate conscientious scruples which kept our friend Maurice out of the Church.

"My dear," continued Miss Polly, turning aside to me, with some energy, as Mr. Reredos, always polite, took her empty cup from her, "I could believe in it if he were doing anything or thinking of doing anything; but if you'll believe me, Clare, it's nothing but idleness—that's what it is. When a young man's idle, if he doesn't fall in love with the first girl he meets, he falls

in love with himself, which is a deal worse. The Rector here will be trying to help Maurice out of his doubts, I shouldn't wonder. His doubts, indeed! If he lost his fellowship and had to work hard for his living, I shouldn't be afraid of his doubts, for my part."

"Well," said I, "but if the loss of his fellowship dispersed poor Maurice's dilettante scepticism, and forced him into orders, it might be better for himself, Miss Polly, but I doubt if it would be better for the Church. When his conscience keeps him outside, we have no reason to find fault, but if he came in against his conscience——"

"Conscience! stuff!" said Miss Polly, with some heat. "Child, that's not what I meant. I meant—for being his father's and mother's son I can't think he's a bad boy at the bottom—I meant a little trouble and fighting would soon put those idle vagaries out of his head. Now, Mr. Reredos, mind you don't go and argue with Maurice Harley. I'm an old woman, and I've seen such before, many's the time. Wait till he's got something to do and something to bear in this world, as he's sure to have, sooner or later. Ah, Life's a wonderful teacher! When a man sits among his books, or a woman at her needle—and there isn't such a great difference as you

might suppose—they get mazing themselves with all kinds of foolish questions, and think themselves very grand too for doing it; but only wait till they find out what God means them to do and to put up with in this world—it makes a deal of difference, Clare.”

“Miss Polly, you are a philosopher, and we never knew it!” said I, while Mr. Reredos stood looking on, much annoyed, and in no small degree contemptuous of the pale old woman who took upon her to direct so perfect a person as himself—for Mr. Reredos was not unlike Maurice Harley, though after his different fashion; he thought he could do a great deal with his wisdom and his words.

“I am not a philosopher; but I have been alone with the dear children since my niece Emmy left me,” said Miss Polly, “and not so able to stir about as I once was; and you know, my dear, one can’t say out everything in one’s mind to children at their age; so, somehow the thoughts come up as if I had been gathering them all my life, and never had time to look at them before.”

“I suspect that is how most of the thoughts that are worth remembering do come,” said I. Mr. Reredos did not say anything. He stood, with a faint smile on his lip, which he did not

mean us to suspect, much less understand—and while he bent his handsome head towards the mistress of the house, gravely attentive, as it was his duty to be, his eyes turned towards Maurice and Alice Harley. Did not I know well enough what was in his mind? He thought we were a couple of old women dozing over our slow experiences. He was still in the world where words and looks produce unspeakable results, and where the chance of a moment determines a life. His eyes turned to those other young people who, like himself, were speculating upon all manner of questions—he would not laugh at us, but a faint gleam of criticism and superiority just brightened upon his lip. I liked him none the worse, for my own part.

“This reads like a Newdigate,” said Maurice Harley. “I suppose Sedgwick brought the book to you, Clara, for a sugar-plum. Listen, how sweetly pretty! These prize poets are really too delicious for anything.”

“You had better write a poem yourself, Maurice, and show what you can do,” cried the indignant Clara; “it is so grand to be a critic, and so easy! Nobody can write to please you, nobody can speak to please you—I should just like to see you do something yourself, Maurice, that we could criticise as well.”

Maurice laughed, poising in his hand the pretty new poetry-book which Mr. Sedgwick had brought down from London to his wife. He looked so superior and so triumphant, that even his grave brother-in-law was provoked.

"Maurice is not so foolish," said Mr. Sedgwick, "as long as he doesn't *do* anything he may be a Shakespeare for anything we know. You girls may worship him as such now, if you please—there he sits quite ready to receive your homage; but if he really ventured into print, Maurice would be only Maurice Harley—just himself, like the rest of us—might even find a critic in his turn, as such is the fate of mortals. No, no, you may be sure Maurice won't commit himself; he's a great deal too wise for that."

Maurice laughed a somewhat constrained laugh, and coloured slightly. Perhaps a touch of conscience made Mr. Sedgwick's sarcasm tell—he threw down the book with a little petulance.

"Far be it from me to object to Clara's tastes. Thanks to my sisters, I know pretty well what young ladies like in the shape of poetry," said Maurice; "they all admire the Newdigates. There was a time when I found Alice in tears over one of these distinguished poems—and that not so very many years ago."

"Oh! don't be so dreadfully satirical!" said Miss Reredos, who was beginning to tire of Johnnie and his stereoscope. "I am sure that year that mamma and I went to Commemoration with Clement there was the sweetest thing imaginable—and so charmingly read too—and I have a copy of it now; but, oh! I know why Mr. Harley does not like the Newdigate," cried the Rector's sister, clasping her soft hands, "he's a Cambridge man!"

"Exactly," said Maurice, recovering himself at once, for he was quite disposed to take Miss Reredos for his antagonist; "you know the jealousy which exists between us. Your brother and I preserve an outside appearance of civility, out of respect to Mrs. Crofton and the presence of the ladies, but nobody can doubt for a moment how we hate each other in our hearts."

"I say, do you though?" cried the small voice, down at Maurice Harley's elbow, of my son Derwie, who was, unluckily, at that moment advancing with the rest of the little troop to say good-night. "Do you hate the Rector, Maurice?—he's the clergyman, you know—he can't do anything wrong; so *he* can't hate *you*—why do you hate him?—is he cleverer than you are? Stand up a moment, please—I don't think he's quite as tall."

This interruption Derwent made with the most perfect sincerity and earnestness, unconsciously guessing at the only reasons which could make a person so accomplished as Maurice Harley hate anybody. Everybody laughed except the individual questioned, who shot a glance of wrath at my boy, and eyed Mr. Reredos with a sort of contemptuous inquiry. Could any one, even a child, imagine the new rector to be cleverer than the ineffable Maurice? He sank down again in the chair from which Derwie had dragged him, laughing with a very bad grace. Then all the broken currents of talk going on in the room, suffered a little ebb and pause. Little rosy faces clustered close about Clara Sedgwick, about Alice and myself, and old Miss Polly, holding up rose-lips full of kisses. Mr. Crofton shook hands with Derwie, and turned him off with an affectionate grasp upon his shoulders, declaring, with a fondness beyond caresses, that he was too old to be kissed. Then we all paused, looking after them as they trooped out of the room. Miss Reredos, full of something clever to say in the way of an attack upon Maurice—Maurice himself too self-conscious to be diverted by that pretty procession, and Johnnie, who was hanging over his stereoscope, and following the Rector's sister with his eyes, were the only persons in the

room who did not watch with a smile and an increased warmth at heart these beautiful children disappearing, one by one, from the door. Mr. Reredos's face shone, and he cast sidelong glances at Alice. He was young, in his first romance of love, not yet spoken. His heart was moved in him with an unconscious blessing to the children; visions of a house of his own, musical with such voices, stole into the Rector's soul—I could see it in his face.

And was it to be so? There was no side glance from the eyes of Alice, reciprocating those of Mr. Reredos—no consciousness, as she stood by the table watching the children, of any future such as that which sparkled in the young Rector's eyes. She stood calmly watching them, nodding and smiling to Derwent, and her little niece Clary, who, hand in hand, were the last to leave the room—the maiden aunt, only a little more independent of the children than their mother—almost as much beloved by them—the young, unmarried woman, gravely cogitating the necessities of her class of age, and feeling much superior to the vanities of love-making, without a single palpitation in her of the future bride, the possible mother. So, at least, it seemed.

CHAPTER VII.

THAT evening—it was the first of her visit to Hilfont, and a perfectly natural thing, considering the long affection between us—I paid Alice a long visit in her own room. I might have done so, even if I had been conscious of nothing to inquire about, nothing to suggest. It was rather late when we all came up-stairs, and when I had seen Miss Polly safely established in her easy chair by her fire, and eluded as well as I could the story about Elinor's (to wit, Lady Greenfield, Sir Willoughby's wife, once Mrs. Herbert Nugent, my cousin, and Bertie's aunt) letter—I turned back to the bright chamber near my own, which was always called Miss Harley's room. Alice was sitting rather listlessly by the table, reading. She looked tired, and did not seem overmuch to enjoy her book. She was very glad to see me come in, and, I suspect, to be delivered from her own thoughts, which it was clear enough she could not quite exorcise by means of literature; for it was not a novel,

which there is some hope in, but a wisdom-book, much esteemed by the superior classes—one of those books which, if it has any power at all, excites one into contradiction, by conclusions about human nature in general, which we can all form our own opinions upon. I suspect Alice could not keep her attention to it, hard though she tried.

When we had talked over indifferent matters for some time, my curiosity, which I might have dignified with the title of anxiety, too, roused me to closer inquiries than, perhaps, were quite justifiable. I knew that after Mr. Reredos had spoken—unless, indeed, he happened to be accepted—Alice's lips were closed for ever on the subject, so I wickedly took advantage of my opportunities.

"Perhaps ere long I shall have to congratulate you," said I, "and you may be sure it would be a great matter for me to have you so very near. We should make famous neighbors, Alice, don't you think? I may well be anxious about your decision, my dear, for my own sake."

"Mrs. Crofton, I do not understand you," said Alice, in a little dismay, looking very curiously and wistfully in my face; then, after a little pause, a deep color suffused her cheeks, she started, and moved her hand impatiently upon the

table, as if in sudden passion with herself, and then added, coldly, with an inexpressible self-restraint and subdued bitterness, which it was hard to understand: "Pray tell me what you mean?"

The contrast of her tone, so suddenly chilled and formal, with the burning color and subdued agitation of her face, struck me wonderfully. "My dear child," said I, "I have no right to ask—I don't want to interfere—but you are sure to have this question submitted to you, Alice, and can't be ignorant of that now, that it has come so far. Cannot you think what I mean?"

Alice paused a moment, then she cast rather a defiant glance at me, and answered, proudly: "If any one has been forming foolish plans about me, Mrs. Crofton, the responsibility is not mine—I know I am not to blame."

"That may be very true," said I, "but I am not speaking of responsibility. Don't you think, dear, that this is important enough to be taken into consideration without any impatience of personal feeling? Deciding one's life by the ordeal of marriage is a human necessity it appears. You are a clergyman's daughter—no way could you fill a better or more congenial place than as a clergyman's wife. If I were you I should not conclude at once, because, perhaps, in the meantime, of your own accord, you have

not quite fallen in desperate love with your lover. My dear, you think I am dreadfully common-place, but I cannot help it. Think, Alice!—you want a life for yourself—a house belonging to you, and you only—you do! Don't say no—everybody does; think! Won't you take all this into consideration before you decide?"

"Because I am going to have 'an offer,' and perhaps I never may have another—because I am not so young now as to be able to throw away my chances—and it is *you* who say so!" cried Alice, throwing at me an angry, bitter, scornful glance. Perhaps, if she had yielded more to my arguments, I might have found it harder than I did now.

"You humiliate me," she cried again: "if I want a life of my own, I want to make it myself; a house of my own?—no I have no ambition for that."

"But you falter a little when you say so," said I, taking cruel advantage of her weakness. "Now, we are not going to discuss the disabilities of women. It is just as impossible for an unmarried man to have what I call a house of his own as it is for you; and as for the privilege of choice—good lack, good lack! much use it seems about to be to poor Mr. Reredos! My dear

child, don't be foolish—there is your brother Maurice with the most complete of educations, and no lack of power to make use of it. What is he going to do with himself? Where are the great advantages he has over his sister? *I* can't see them. But no, that's not the question. The Rector is a good man; he is young, he is well off; he is agreeable. Your dearest friend could not choose a more suitable life for you than that you would have at the Hilfont Rectory. Now, Alice, think. Are you going to make up your mind to throw away all this, and a good man's happiness besides?"

"Oh, Mrs. Crofton! Mrs. Crofton! and it is you who say so!" said poor Alice, with looks which certainly must have consumed me had I been of combustible material—"this is from you!"

"And why not, my dear?" said I, meekly. "Am not I next to your mother, Alice?—next oldest friend?—and next interested in your welfare?"

"If you mean that you have a right to say anything you please to me," said Alice, seizing my hand and kissing it in a quick revulsion of feeling, "it is true to the very farthest that you choose to stretch it; but that is not what you mean. Oh, dear Mrs. Crofton!" said the poor

girl with a rising blush and a certain solemn indignation wonderful to me—"I can only say it again; of all persons in the world that I should have had such words from *you*!"

With which exclamation she suddenly cast a guilty, startled look upon me as if she had betrayed something and hid her face in her hands. How did she know what was in my heart?—how could she tell that I was arguing against my own dear and long-cherished plans, which I had made it a point of honor never to hint in the remotest manner to her? But here we approached the region where another word was impossible. She would not have uttered a syllable of explanation for her life—I dared not, if I meant to have any comfort in mine; I said nothing to her by which it was possible to infer that I understood what she meant. I absolutely slurred over the whole question—here we had reached the bound.

"Well, dear," said I, "don't distress yourself so very much about it—you must decide according to your own will and not to mine; only do think it over again in the fresh morning before the Rector gets an opportunity of speaking to you. Good night, Alice—don't sit reading, but go to sleep!"

She raised her face to me, and leant her cheek a little more than was quite needful against mine

as I kissed her—and so we parted without another word between us. Possibly, we women talk a great deal on most occasions; sometimes, however, we show a singular faculty for keeping silent. Next morning, Alice and I met each other as if we had never spoken a word which all the world might not hear. We interchanged no confidences, looked no looks of private understanding. Indeed, surely nothing *had* passed between us—all the world might have listened and been none the wiser. What had a momentary emphasis, a sudden look to do with the matter? Alice spoke nothing but her usual sentiments, and I did not say a word inconsistent with mine.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE next morning was Easter Sunday. I have no doubt Mr. Reredos would have been glad enough to add a private joy of his own to the rejoicings of the festival, and might not have thought it unsuitable to declare himself even on that morning could he have had a chance. However, there was not very much time before Church hours, and to be sure the Rector ought to have been thinking of something else. It was a true Easter morning, full of sunshine and that new life of spring born out of death and darkness which to every heart must bear a certain charm. Is it something of a compensation to the sorrowful that all the wonderful silent symbols of Nature speak to them with a special force which does not belong to the happy? We were all dwelling at ease, people untroubled—our hearts were glad in the sunshine, which to us looked like a promise of permanence and peace unclouded. Only far off with an apprehension of the thoughts, and not of the heart, did the meaning

of the feast which we were keeping occur to us. To Derwent and myself this was perhaps the happiest time of our lives. Perhaps to us the Resurrection was little more than an article of belief—I think we thus paid something for our happiness. At all events it did not jar upon us to perceive a certain agitation in the Rector's tones—a certain catching of his breath in the little pleasant sermon, not without some small sentences in it specially meant for the ear of Alice, but perfectly “suited to the occasion,” which Mr. Reredos delivered. Everybody was very attentive, save Maurice Harley. Maurice had some liberal and lofty objections to the Athanasian creed; he sat down and amused himself reading the Gunpowder Plot Service with secret smiles of criticism, while his neighbors round him murmured forth with a universal rustic voice that strenuous confession of the faith—and he sketched a bracket (we were rather proud of our Church) while Mr. Reredos preached his sermon, and comported himself generally as a highly superior man, attending Church out of complacency to his friends, might be expected to do.

Next day I fear Mr. Reredos ascertained beyond question what he had to expect from Alice Harley. With a look of stormy agitation, strongly restrained, he let me know on the Mon-

day that it was quite necessary for him to return to the Rectory. He had some sick people to attend to, who demanded his presence in his own house. I did not say that there was only half a mile of distance between the Rectory and the Hall—I acquiesced in his explanations, and accepted his apologies. Miss Reredos, however, was much more difficult to manage. I heard him tell her in a low tone that she must get ready to go; and the young lady's answer of astonishment, and resistance, and total ignorance of any reason why her pleasure should be balked, was audible enough to everybody in the room.

“Go away! Leave Hilfont!” she exclaimed with a gasp of amazement. “Why should we go away? Mrs. Crofton was good enough to ask us for a week, and I am sure you could do your duty quite as well here as at the Rectory. Oh, please, Mrs. Crofton, listen! The only sick people I know of are that old man at the turnpike, and his blind daughter—he could visit them quite as well going from Hilfont as from the Rectory. I believe this is the nearest of the two.”

“Oh, but Mr. Williams from the little chapel goes to see old Johnnie Dunn,” interrupted little Derwie; “he was there yesterday, and Martha's

quite well now, and goes to chapel like anything. Miss Reredos, do you know Martha wasn't always blind? she used to work and make dresses when she was young. Once she lived in Simon-borough and learned her trade, and I suppose it was there she learned to go to chapel. Martha says they're not Church-folks at all. I don't think they want Mr. Reredos to go there."

"You're not very complimentary, Derwie," said the Rector, with a slight quiver of his lip, which I recognized as a sign of the passion and deep excitement in which he was. With that wild pain and mortification tugging at his heart, it would have been a relief to him to burst out in an ebullition of rage or impatience against somebody, and I instinctively put out my hand to protect my boy. "But it is sometimes my duty to go where they don't want me," he added, with a laugh as significant, "and with many regrets and many thanks to Mrs. Crofton we must still go back to-day. Laura, get ready, please."

In pity for the unfortunate Rector, who, I saw, longed to escape from the room, the inquisitive looks of Mrs. Clara, who was present, and the distinct statement from Derwie, which I knew to be impending, to the effect, that of his own certain knowledge nobody was ill in the village,

I interposed, and we made a compromise—the Rector left us and his sister stayed. Miss Reredos was profoundly pleased with the arrangement. Perhaps her dear Clement did not confide to her his private reasons for so hasty a return, and I am not sure that she was not quite as well satisfied with his absence, which might have possibly spoiled her own particular sport—or interfered with it at least. So he went away with a certain impetus and haste upon him—his romance come to an effectual end, and his sensations somewhat bitter. He was not lackadaisical, but savage, as men are under their mortifications when they are no longer in their first youth. I daresay, if one could have read his thoughts, there were ferocious denunciations there against the women who beguile a man to commit himself so fatally, which would have been very unjust to poor Alice. I am afraid it is very cold-hearted of me to speak so lightly of a serious disappointment, which this certainly was to Mr. Reredos. I have no doubt he was really unhappy ; but I thought it a good symptom that the unhappiness took a savage turn.

Miss Reredos left behind, pursued, as I have said, her own sport. She was prettier than I thought her at first—she had a little of that teasing wit which clever young ladies exercise

upon attractive young men, and she had a strong sentimental reserve, much more in keeping with her pale complexion and black ringlets than the lighter mood. A couple of days had not passed over us before we all perceived that the poor lame boy, Johnnie Harley, was hopelessly taken in her toils. Just at first nobody had paid particular attention to the intercourse between these two. It was very kind of Miss Reredos to talk to the unfortunate young man, and interest herself about his pictures, and listen to his dreams; and so wonderful a prominence has one's actual self to one's own eyes, however unselfish, that I believe Alice was quite of opinion that Miss Reredos, expecting to be connected with the family by-and-by, was paying all these friendly attentions to Johnnie by way of conciliating herself. Nothing could be further from the intentions of the Rector's sister. She was strongly of opinion that each man for himself was the most satisfactory rule, and being possessed of that spirit of conquest which some women have by nature, commenced her operations from the moment of entering the house. I do not think she could help it, poor girl—it was natural to her. There were in Hilfont only two persons accessible to her charms—Maurice, in every way an eligible victim, and poor cripple Johnnie, to whom, one

could have supposed, not even a coquettish girl at a loss for a prey, would have had the heart to offer her sweet poison. But the heart, I fear, has little to do with such concerns, and almost before the suspicions of the other women of the party, from myself downward, were awakened, the mischief was done. Miss Reredos, we had no difficulty in perceiving, had set her heart upon the subjugation of Maurice, whether for any personal reason, or for sport, or as a means of retaliation, it was difficult to tell; and really I was not in the least concerned about the peace of mind of the Fellow of Exeter. But Johnnie! we all rose up together to his defence, with secret vows of self-devotion. All the women of us guarded him about, shielding his little table and his stereoscope from the approach of the enemy—even Di, tall, timid, and twelve years old, stood by the lad with a natural instinct. But we were too late. He answered Miss Polly, I fear, rather sharply, turned his back upon myself, and gave Mrs. Clara a brotherly push away from him. He wanted none of us—he wanted only the Siren who was charming the poor boy among such rocks and quicksands as his frail boat had never yet ventured upon. When Miss Reredos addressed herself to Maurice, his unfortunate brother turned savage looks upon that all-

accomplished young man. In our first indignation we were all rather cold to Miss Reredos, and Johnnie, quick-sighted as his infirmities helped to make him, perceived it in a moment, and resented the neglect, which of course he attributed to our envy of her perfections. Then we tried artifice instead, and Clara, sister of the victim, got up a very warm sudden regard for the enchantress, whose opinion she sought upon everything; but this Miss Reredos speedily discovered, exposed, and exulted in; there was no help for it—the damage which was done, was done, and could not be repaired.

Meanwhile the flirtation with Maurice did not advance so satisfactorily—he was so much accustomed to admire himself, that the habit of admiring another came slowly to him; and then, as Miss Reredos took the initiative, and did not spare to be cleverly rude to the young man, he, taking advantage of his privileges, was cleverly rude to her in reply, from which fashionable mode of beginning, they advanced by degrees to closer friendship, or, at least, familiarity of address. Alice looked on at all this with the most solemn disapproval—it was amusing to see the dead gravity of her glances towards them, the tacit displeasure, and shame, and resentment on account of “her sex!” Poor Alice took the re-

sponsibility on her own shoulders; she watched the levity of the other girl, who did not resemble herself in a single particular, with a solemn sense of being involved in it, which struck me as the oddest comicality I had seen. Could anybody suppose Maurice Harley concerned about another man's shortcomings, only because the culprit was a man, and one of his own *sex*? If it had not been so entirely true and sincere, it would have been absurd—this championship of Alice; only women ever dream of such an *esprit de corps*—but she maintained it with such absolute good faith and solemn gravity, that while one laughed one loved her the better. There she sat, severe in her youthful virtue, gravely believing herself old, and past the period of youth, but in her heart as high-flying, as obstinate, as heroical as if she were seventeen. Mrs. Clara knew nothing of that romance; perhaps there are delicate touches of feminine character, which only show themselves to perfection in the “unmarried woman”—the woman who has come to maturity without having the closer claims of husband and children to charm her out of her thoughts and theories—though it is only in a very gracious subject that such an example as Alice Harley could be produced.

CHAPTER IX.

“WELL, really!” said little Mrs. Sedgwick, bridling with offended virtue, “I don’t think I am very hard upon a little innocent flirting—sometimes, you know, there’s no harm in it—and young people will amuse themselves; but *really*, Mrs. Crofton, *that* Miss Reredos is quite ridiculous. I do wonder for my part how men can be so taken in!—and our Maurice who is so clever!—and she is not even pretty—if she had been pretty one could have understood.”

“My dear Clara,” said I, “perhaps it is not very complimentary to your brother, but I do think the most sensible thing Maurice could do would be to fall in love. I don’t say of course with Miss Reredos; but then, you see, we can’t choose the person. If he fell desperately in love and made a fool of himself, I am sure I should not think any worse of him, and it would do him no harm.”

Both the sisters drew up their shoulders a little, and communicated between each other a tele-

graphic glance of displeasure. Between themselves they could be hard enough upon Maurice, but, after the use of kinsfolk, could not bear the touch of a stranger.

“Really, I cannot say I should be very grateful to Maurice for such a sister-in-law,” said Clara, with a toss of her head.

“I don’t think there is very much to fear,” said Miss Polly. “Do you know what little Derwie told me yesterday? He said a poor woman in the village had three or four children ill with the hooping-cough—at least so I understood the child from the sound he made to show me what it was. Now, I really think if I were you, Clare, I would not let that child wander so much about the village. Neither Di nor Emmy has ever had hooping-cough, and I shall be almost frightened to let them go out of doors.”

“Oh, I assure you it’s nothing, Miss Polly!” cried Clara—“mine had it two years ago—even the baby—and took their walks just the same in all weathers; and they must have it one time or other, you know—and such great girls as your two nieces! Our children all got over it perfectly well. Though Hugh says I am ridiculously timid, I never was the least afraid. Their chests were rubbed every night, and they had something which Hugh said it was polite to call

medicine. Oh, I assure you there's nothing to be at all afraid of! especially at this time of the year."

"I daresay that's very true, my dear," said Miss Polly, who took little Clara's nursery instructions and assurances in very good part, "but it isn't always so. There's my poor little nephew, little Willoughby—dear, dear! to think what a strong man his father is, and how delicate that poor child looks! I can't help thinking sometimes it must be his mother's fault; though to be sure they have the best of nurses, and Lady Greenfield can't be expected to make a slave of herself; that poor dear little soul was very ill with the hooping-cough. Clara—all children are not so fortunate as your pretty darlings; and that reminds me, Clare, that you have never seen Elinor's letter yet; she mentions her nephew in it, as I think I told you; so, though it's almost all about Emmy, my dear children's mother, if you'll wait a minute I'll just bring it down."

Saying which Miss Polly left the room. Alice sat rather stiffly at her work and looked very busy—so very busy that I was suspicious of some small gleam of interest on her part touching the contents of Lady Greenfield's letter.

"Miss Polly does not love Lady Greenfield too

much," said Clara, laughing; "but," she added, with a little flush of angry anticipation, "it's nothing to laugh at after all. Suppose Maurice were to marry Miss Reredos! Oh, Mrs. Crofton, isn't it shocking of you to put such dreadful thoughts in one's head! Fancy, Alice! and to settle down hereabout—to be near us!—I am sure I could never be civil to her: and what do you suppose mamma would say?"

"Maurice has nothing but his fellowship," said Alice.

"Well, to be sure, that is some comfort," said Clara; "but then I daresay he might get a living if he tried, and Hugh could even"—

Here Miss Polly came in with her letter, so we did not hear at that moment what could be done by Hugh, who, in the eyes of his little wife, was happily a person all-powerful.

"My dear," said Miss Polly, laying down the letter in her lap, and making a little preliminary lecture in explanation, "you remember that Emmy, my niece, two years ago, married again. Well, you know, one couldn't well blame her. She was only one and twenty, poor little soul, when she was left with these two children; and I was but too glad to keep the little girls with me, so she was quite what people call without encumbrance, you see. So she married that cu-

rate whom she had met at Fenosier. Well, it's no use disguising it—Lady Greenfield and I are perhaps not such great friends as we ought to be, and Emmy has a temper of her own, and is just the weak-minded sort of little soul that will worry herself to death over those slights and annoyances that good near neighbors can do to each other—she ought to know better, after all she's gone through. So here's a letter from Elinor, telling me, of course, she's as innocent as the day, and knows nothing about it—and so sorry for poor dear little Emmy—and so good and sweet-tempered herself, that really, if I were as near to her as Emmy is, I do believe I should do her a mischief. There's the letter, Clare; you can read that part about Bertie out aloud if you please—perhaps the girls might like to hear it."

With which, shaking off a little heat of exasperation which had gathered about her, Miss Polly resumed her usual work and placidity. I confess it was not without a smile I read Lady Greenfield's letter. I fortunately was under no temptations of the kind myself. If I had been, I daresay, I should have turned out exactly like my neighbors; but the spectators of a domestic squabble or successful piece of neighborly oppression and tyranny always see the ludicrous

side of it, and I could understand my lady's mild malice and certainty of not being to blame, so well. It appeared that the poor little Emmy, completely overpowered by Lady Greenfield's neighborly attentions, had in her turn worried her curate, and that the result of their united efforts was the withdrawal of the young clergyman, who did not feel himself able to cope with my lady at the Hall and his own exasperated little wife in the cottage, which unlooked-for result Lady Greenfield took the earliest opportunity of communicating to her dear Polly, with condolences over Emmy's want of spirit and weak propensity, poor child!—to see neglect and slight where nothing of the kind was meant. I was so long getting over this, that, having heard from him recently myself, I did not make the haste I might have done to read what Lady Greenfield had to say about Bertie. I was reminded of this by seeing suddenly over the top of the letter a slight, quick movement made by Alice. It was only the most common change of position—nothing could be more natural; but there was a certain indescribable something of impatience and suspense in it which I comprehended by a sudden instinct. I stumbled immediately down to the paragraph about Bertie:

“Pray tell Clare Crofton,” wrote Lady Green-

field, "in case she should not have heard from Bertie lately—which is very likely, for young men I know don't always keep up their correspondences as they ought, especially with elderly female relations, like dear Clare and myself—that I had a letter from my nephew by the last mail. He has not done yet lamenting that he could not get home and go to the Crimea, but says his old brigadier is suspicious of the Native army, and prophesies that there will be some commotion among them, which Bertie thinks will be great fun, and that a thorough cutting down would do these pampered fellows all the good in the world: so he says, you know, as boys will talk—but the Company's officers laugh at the idea. If all keeps quiet, Bertie says he is rather sick of India—he thinks he will come back and see his friends: he thinks perhaps his dear cousin Clare has somebody in her pocket whom she means him to marry. To be sure, after giving him Estcourt, it would be only right that she should have a vote in the choice of his wife. Such a great matter, you know, for a boy like Bertie, his father's fourth son, to come into a pretty little property like Estcourt—and so good of dear Clare!—pray tell her, with my love."

Not having taken the precaution to glance

over this, as I ought to have done from my previous acquaintance with "dear" Elinor, I had stumbled into the middle of that statement about the somebody whom cousin Clare had in her pocket before I was aware; and after an awkward pause, felt constrained to proceed. I thought the malice of the epistle altogether would defeat itself, and went on accordingly to the end of the sentence. Then I folded up the letter and gave it to Miss Polly.

"I wonder does Lady Greenfield mean to make me so thoroughly uncomfortable when Bertie comes home that I shall not let him come here at all," said I; "or to terrify me out of the possibility of introducing him to anybody, lest I should be said to be influencing his choice? But indeed she need not take the trouble. I know Bertie, and Bertie knows me much too well for the success of any such attempt. I will not have my liberty infringed upon, I assure you, Miss Polly, not by half a dozen Lady Greenfields."

"My dear, you don't suppose me an accessory?" said Miss Polly, with a little spirit. "Did any one ever see such a wanton mischief-maker? I think she takes quite a delight in setting people by the ears. If Bertie ever did say such a thing, Clare," said Miss Polly, with a little vehemence, "about somebody in your pocket, you

know, I could swear it was Elinor, and nobody else, who put it into his head."

By the merest inadvertence I am sure, certainly not by any evil intention, Miss Polly, as she delivered these words, allowed her mild old glances to stray towards Alice. I at the same moment chanced to give a furtive look in the same direction. Of course, just at the instant of danger, Alice, who had been immovable hitherto, suddenly looked up and detected us both. I do not know what meanings of which they were innocent her sensitive pride discovered in our eyes, but she sprang up with an impatience and mortification quite irrestrainable, her very neck growing crimson as she turned her head out of my sight. I understood well enough that burning blush of shame, and indignation, and wounded pride; it was not the blush of a love-sick girl, and my heart quaked when it occurred to me that Lady Greenfield might possibly have done a more subtle act of mischief by her letter than even she intended. Whom was I so likely to have in my pocket as Alice Harley? Indeed, was not she aware by intuition of some such secret desire in my mind? And suppose Bertie were coming home with tender thoughts towards the friend of his boyhood, and perhaps a little tender pleasant wonder, full of suggestions, why

Alice Harley, and she alone, out of her immediate companions, should remain unmarried—what good would that laudable, and much-to-be-desired frame of mind do to the poor boy now? If he came to Hilfont this very night, the most passionate lover, did not I know that Alice would reject him much more vehemently than she had rejected the Rector—scornfully, because conscious of the secret inclination towards him, which, alas! lay treacherous at the bottom of her heart? Oh, Lady Greenfield! Oh, dearest of “dear” Elinors! if you had anywhere two most sincere well-wishers, they were surely Miss Polly and myself!

CHAPTER X.

“WHY will not you come with us to London, Alice?” said I. “Mr. Crofton wishes it almost as much as I do. Such a change would do you good, and I do not need to tell you how pleasant it would be to me. Mrs. Harley and the young people at home can spare you. Kate, you know, is quite old enough to help your mother. Why are you so obstinate? You have not been in town in the season since the year after Clara’s marriage.”

“I went up to see the pictures last year,” said Alice demurely.

“Oh pray, Alice, don’t be so dreadfully proper!” cried Clara; “that’s what she’s coming to, Mrs. Crofton. The second week in May—to see all the exhibitions and hear an Oratorio in Exeter Hall—and make ‘mems.’ in her diary when she has got through them, like those frightful people who have their lives written! Oh dear, dear! to think our Alice should have stiffened into such a shocking old maid!”

“ Well, Clara, dear, I am very glad you find your own lot so pleasant that you would like to see everybody the same as yourself,” said Alice, sententiously, and with no small amount of mild superiority; “ for my part I think the *rôle* of old maid is quite satisfactory, especially when one has so many nephews and neices—and why should I go to London, Mrs. Crofton? It is all very well for Clara—Clara is in circumstances, of course, that make it convenient and natural—but as for me, who have nothing at all to do with your grand life, why should I go and vex myself with my own? Perhaps I might not have strength of mind to return comfortably to the cottage, and look after the butcher’s bills, and see that there were no cobwebs in the corners—and though I am of very little importance elsewhere,” said Alice, coloring a little, and with some unnecessary fervor, “ I am of consequence at home.”

“ But then, you see,” said I, “ Mrs. Harley has four daughters—and I have not one.”

“ Ah! by-and-by,” said Alice, with a smile and a sigh, “ Mrs. Harley will only have one daughter. Kate and little Mary will marry just as Clara has done. I shall be left alone with mamma and Johnnie; that is why I don’t want to do anything which shall disgust me with my quiet life—at least that is one reason,” added Alice, with a

slight blush. "No, no—what would become of the world if we were all exactly alike—what a hum-drum, dull prospect it would be if everybody were just as happy, and as gay, and as much in the sun as everybody else. You don't think, Clara, how much the gray tints of our household that is to be—mamma old, Johnnie, poor fellow, so often in trouble, and myself a stout housekeeper, will add to the picturesqueness of the landscape—much more, than if our house were as gay as your own."

"Why, Alice, you are quite a painter!" cried I, in a little surprise.

"No, indeed—I wish I were," said Alice. "I wonder why it is that some people can *do* things, and some people, with all the will in the world, can only admire them when they're done, and think—surely it's my own fault—surely if I had tried I could have done as well! I suppose it's one of the common troubles of women. I am sure I have looked at a picture, or read a book many a time, with the feeling that all that was in my heart if I could only have got it out. You smile, Mrs. Crofton—perhaps it's very absurd—I daresay a woman ought to be very thankful when she can understand books, and has enough to live on without needing to work," added this feminine misanthrope

with a certain pang of natural spite and malice in her voice.

Spite and malice! I venture to use such ugly words, because it was my dear Alice, the purest, tenderest, and most lovable of women, who spoke.

"There are a great many people in this world who think it a great happiness to have enough to live on," said I, besides women. I don't know if Maurice has your ambition, Alice—but, at least he's a man, and has no special disadvantages; yet, begging your pardons, young ladies, I think Alice is good for something more than *he* is, as the world stands."

"Ah, but then Maurice, you know, Mrs. Crofton—Maurice has doubts," said Clara, with a slight pique at my boldness. "Poor Maurice! he says he must follow out his inquiries wherever they lead him, and however sad the issue may be. It is very dreadful—he may not be able to believe in anything before he is done—but then, he must not trifle with his conscience. And with such very serious things to trouble him, it is too bad he should be misunderstood."

"Don't, Clara! hush!" whispered Alice, looking a little ashamed of this argument.

"But why should I hush? Hugh says just the same as Mrs. Crofton—it's very provoking—but these active people do not take into consideration

the troubles of a thoughtful mind, Maurice says."

"That is very likely," said I, with a little complacency—"but remember this is all a digression—Alice, will you come to London or will you not?"

Alice got up and made me a very pretty curtsy. "No, please, Mrs. Crofton, I will not," said that very unmanageable young lady. She looked so provokingly pretty, piquant, and attractive at the moment that I longed to punish her. And Bertie was coming home! and her mind was irretrievably prejudiced against him; it was almost too much for human patience—but to be sure, when a woman is seven-and-twenty, she has some sort of right to know her own mind.

At that moment little Clary Sedgwick, all in a flutter of pink ribbons, came rustling into the room, her very brief little skirt inflated with crinoline, and rustling half as much as her mamma's—a miniature fine lady, with perfect little gloves, a miraculous little hat, and ineffable embroideries all over her; but with a child's face so sweet, and a little princess's air so enchanting, that one could no more find fault with her splendor than one could find fault with the still more exquisite decorations of a bird or a flower. Clary came to tell her mamma that the carriage was

at the door, and little Mrs. Sedgwick swept off immediately, followed by Alice, to get ready for her drive. They were going to call upon somebody near. Clary remained with me till they came back, and Derwie was not long of finding out his playfellow. Derwie (my boy was a vulgar-minded boy, with a strong preference for things over thoughts, as I have before said) stood speechless, lost in admiration of Clary's grandeur. Then he cast a certain glance of half-comical comparison upon his own coat, worn into unspeakable shabbiness by three weeks of holidays, and upon his brown little hands, garnished with cuts and scratches, and I am grieved to say not even so clean as they might have been. When he had a little recovered his first amazement, Derwie turned her round and round with the tips of his fingers. Clary was by no means unwilling; she exhibited her Easter splendor with all the grace of a little belle.

"Mamma, isn't she grand?" said Derwie—"isn't she pretty? I never saw her look so pretty before."

"Oh, Derwie, for shame!" said Clary, holding down her head with a pretty little affectation of confusion wonderful to behold.

"For shame?—Why?—For you know you are pretty," said my straightforward son, "whe-

ther you are dressed grand or not. Mamma, did you ever see her like this before?—I never did. I should just like to have a great big glass case and put you in, Clary, so that you might always look just as you look now.”

“Oh, Derwie!” cried Clary, again, but this time with unaffected horror, “I’d starve if you put me in there!”

“No, because I’d bring you something every day,” said Derwie—“all my own pudding, and every cake I got, and the poor women in the village would be so pleased to come and look at you, Clary. Tell me what’s the name of this thing; I’ll tell Susan Stubbs, the dressmaker, all about you. They like to see ladies in grand dresses, all the cottage people; so do I; but I like to see you best of all. Here, Clary, Clary! don’t go away! Look at her pink little gloves, mamma!—and I say, Clary, haven’t you got a parasol?”

“You silly boy! what do you suppose I want with a parasol when I’m going to drive with mamma?” cried Clary, with that indescribable little toss of her head.

At that interesting moment the mamma, of whom this delightful little beauty was a reproduction, made her appearance, buttoning pink gloves like Clary’s, and rustling in her rosy,

shining, silken draperies, like a perfect rose, all dewy and fragrant, not even quite full-blown yet, in spite of the bud by her side. Alice came after her, a little demure, in her brown silk gown, very affectionate, and just a little patronizing to the pretty mother and daughter—on the whole rather superior to these lovely fooleries of theirs, on her eminence of unmarried woman. My pretty Alice! Her gravity, notwithstanding she was quite as much a child as either of them, was wonderfully amusing, though she did not know it. They went down-stairs with their pleasant feminine rustle, charming the echoes with their pleasant voices. My boy Derwie, entirely captivated by Mrs. Sedgwick's sudden appearance on the scene—an enlarged edition of Clary—followed them to the door, vainly attempting to lay up some memoranda in his boyish mind for the benefit of Susan Stubbs. Pleased with them all, I turned to the window to see them drive away, when, lo! there suddenly emerged out of the curtains the dark and agitated face of Johnnie Harley. Had we said anything in our late conversation to wound the sensitive mind of the cripple? He had been there all the time.

CHAPTER XI.

"JOHNNIE, is there anything the matter. Why have you been sitting there?" cried I.

"Oh, no, there's nothing the matter," said Johnnie, in such a tone as a wild beast making a snap at one might have used if it had possessed the faculty of words. "I was there because I happened to be there before you came into the room, Mrs. Crofton; I beg your pardon! I don't mean to be rude."

"I think it is quite necessary you should say as much," said I. "Your sisters and I have been talking here for some time, quite unaware of your presence. That is not becoming. No one ought to do such things, especially a young man of right feeling like yourself."

"Oh, you think I have right feelings," cried Johnnie, bitterly, "you think I am man enough to know what honor means? That is something, at least. I have been well brought up, haven't I? Mrs. Crofton," continued the unfortunate youth, "you were rather hard upon Maurice

just now—I heard you, and he deserves it. If I were like Maurice, I should be ashamed to be as useless as he is. I'm not so useless now, in spite of everything ; but you'll be frank with me—why does Alice speak of keeping house with my mother and *Johnnie* ? Why, when Kate, and even little Mary, are supposed to have homes of their own, and Maurice, of course, to be provided for—why is there to be a special establishment, all neutral colored and in the shade, for my mother, and Alice, and *me* ?”

I sat gazing at the poor youth in the most profound confusion and amazement. What could I say to him ? How, if he did not perceive it himself, could I explain the naturalness of poor Alice's anticipations ? I had not a word to say ; his question took me entirely by surprise, and struck me dumb—it was unanswerable.

“You do not say anything,” said Johnnie, vehemently. “Why does Alice suppose *she* will have to take care of me all my life through ? Why should I go to contribute that alternative of shade which makes the landscape picturesque ?—picturesque !” exclaimed poor Johnnie, breathing out the words upon a long breath of wrath and indignation ; “is that all I am good for ? Do you suppose God has made me in a man's form, with a man's heart, only to add a subtle

charm to another man's happiness by the contrast of my misery? I believe in no such thing, Mrs. Crofton. Is that what Alice means?"

"I believe in no such thing either," said I, relieved to be able to say something; "and you forget, Johnnie, that the same life which Alice assigned to you she chose for herself. She thought, I suppose, because your health is not strong, that you would choose to live at home—she thought"——

"Mrs. Crofton," said Johnnie, "why don't you say it out? she thought—but why say thought—she *know* I was a cripple, and debarred from the joyous life of man; she thought that to such as me no heavenly help could come; it did not occur to her that perhaps there might be an angel in the spheres who would love me, succor me, give me a place among the happy—yes, even me! You think I speak like a fool," continued the young man, the flush of his excitement brightening all his face, and the natural superlatives of youth, all the warmer and stronger for the physical infirmities which seemed to shut him out from their legitimate use, pouring to his lips, "and so I should have been, but for the divine chance that brought me here. Ah, Mrs. Crofton, you did not know what an Easter of the soul you were asking me to! I came only

a boy, scarcely aware of the dreary colors in which life lay before me. Now I can look at these dreary colors only by way of Alice's contrast—to make the reality more glorious—for I too shall have the home and the life of a man !”

He stopped, not because his words were exhausted, but because breath failed him—he stood before me, raising himself erect out of his habitual stoop of weakness, strengthened by the inspiring force of the great delusion, which gave color to his face and nerve to his hand. Looking at him so, his words did not seem such sad, bitter, heart-breaking folly as they were. Poor boy ! poor Johnnie ! how would he fall prostrate upon the cold, unconsolatory earth, when this spell was broken ! I could have cried over him, as he stood there defying me ; he had drunk that cup of Circe—but he did not know in his momentary intoxication that it was poison to him.

“ My dear Johnnie,” said I, “ I am very glad of anything that makes you happy—but there is surely no occasion to speak so strongly. Alice, I must remind you again, chose exactly the same life for herself that she supposed for you ”——

“ Alice has had her youth and her choice,” said Johnnie, with a calmer tone, and sinking,

his first excitement over, into a chair; "but she does not think Maurice is likely to share that gray life of hers—Maurice, who, as you say yourself, is of no use in the world—nor Harry, whom they have all forgotten now he is in Australia, nor the children at home; only mamma when she is old, and *Johnnie*—well, it is of no use speaking. A man's business is not to speak, but to work."

"That is very true, certainly," said I: "but tell me, will you—if it is not wrong to ask—what has made this great change in your ideas, all at once?"

"Ah, Mrs. Crofton, don't you know?" cried Johnnie, blushing, a soft overpowering youthful blush, which would have done no discredit to Clara herself; and the poor, foolish boy looked at me with an appealing triumphant look, as if he at once entreated me to say, and defied me to deny that *she* was altogether an angel, and he the very happiest of boys or men.

"My dear boy," said I, "don't be angry with me. I've known you all your life, Johnnie. I don't mean to say a word against Miss Reredos—but tell me, has there been any explanation between her and you?"

He hesitated a moment, blushing still.

"No," he said, after a pause; "no—I have

not been able to arrange my thoughts at all yet. I have thought of nothing but—but herself—and this unimaginable hope of happiness—and I am a man of honor, Mrs. Crofton. I will not speak to her till I know whether I have anything but love to offer—not because I am so base as to suppose that money could recommend a man to *her*, or so foolish as to think that I will ever have anything beyond *income*; but when I do speak, you understand, Mrs. Crofton, it is not for vague love-making, but to ask her to be my wife.”

He looked at me with his sudden air of manhood and independence, again somewhat defiant. Heaven help the poor boy! I heard myself groaning aloud in the extremity of my bewilderment and confusion; poor Johnnie, with his superb self-assumption!—he, a fortnight ago, the cheerfulest of boy invalids, the kindest of widow’s sons!—and she, five years older than he, at the lowest reckoning, an experienced young lady, with dreams of settlements and trousseaux occupying her mature mind! Alack, alack! what was to come of it? I sat silent, almost gaping with wonderment at the boy. At last I caught at the idea of asking him what his prospects or intentions were—though without an idea that he had any prospects, or knew in the least what he was talking about.

"You spoke of income, Johnnie—may I ask what you were thinking of?"

Johnnie blushed once more, though after a different fashion; he grew confidential and eager—like himself.

"I have told no one else," he said, "but I will tell you, Mrs. Crofton, not only because you are our oldest friend, but because I have just told you something so much more important. I—I have written something—nobody knows!"

"Oh, you poor boy!" cried I, quite thankful to be able on less delicate ground to make an outcry over him; "don't you think half the people in the country have written something?—and are you to make an income by that?"

"I beg your pardon," said Johnnie, with dignity, "but it's *accepted*, Mrs. Crofton—that makes all the difference. Half the country don't have letters from the booksellers saying that it's very good and they'll publish it on the usual terms. I could show you the letter," added my young author, blushing once more, and putting his hand to his breast-pocket—"I have it here."

And there it was, accordingly, to my intense wonderment—and Johnnie's hopes had, however small, an actual foundation. On the book about

to be published on "the usual terms" the poor boy had built up his castle. Here he was to bring Miss Reredos to a fairy bower of love and literature—which, alas! I doubted would be very little to that young lady's taste; but I dared not tell Johnnie so—poor, dreaming, foolish cripple-boy! Nothing afterwards, perhaps, would taste so sweet as that delusion, and though the natural idea that "it would be kindness to undeceive him" of course moved me strongly, I had not the boldness to try, knowing very well that it would do no good. He must undeceive himself, that was evident. Thank Heaven he was so young! When his eyes were opened he would be the bitterest and most miserable of misanthropes for a few months, and then, it was to be hoped, things would mend. I saw no other ending to Johnnie's romance. But he went hobbling away from me with his stick and his stoop, as full of his momentary fallacious happiness, as if he had been the handsome young prince of the fairy tale, whom the love of Miss Reredos would charm back to his proper comeliness. Alas, poor Johnnie! If his Laura could have wrought that miracle I fear the spell was still impossible, for lack of the love—miraculous magic! the only talisman which even in a fairy tale can charm the lost beauty back.

CHAPTER XII.

“Now, if I had the luck to hold a confidential talk with Maurice, I should have gone round the entire Harley family,” said I to myself the next morning, “and be in the secret of sundry imaginations which have not seen the light of day—but Maurice, fortunately, is not likely to make me nor any one else his *confidante*. I wonder if there is anything at all concerning him which it would be worth one’s while to be curious about.?”

The question was solved sooner than I thought. When everybody had left our pleasant breakfast-room but myself, and I, with my little basket of keys in my hand, was preparing to follow, Maurice, who had been lingering by the great window, startled me by asking for a few minutes’ conversation, “if I was quite at leisure.” I put down my basket with the utmost promptitude. Curiosity, if not courtesy, made me perfectly at leisure to hear anything he might have to say.

"I have undertaken a very foolish office," said Maurice—"I have had the supreme conceit and presumption of supposing that I could perhaps plead with you, Mrs. Crofton, the cause of a friend."

"I trust I shall feel sufficiently flattered," said I, assuming the same tone. "And pray who is the friend who has the advantage of your support, Maurice? and what does he want of me?"

The young man colored and looked affronted—he was highly sensitive to ridicule, like all self-regarding men.

"Nay, pray don't convince me so distinctly of my folly before I start," he said; "the friend is a college friend of mine, who was so absurd as to marry before he had anything to live on; a very good fellow with—oh! don't be afraid—perfectly sound views, I assure you, Mrs. Crofton, though he is acquainted with me."

"I should think being acquainted with you very likely to help a sensible man to sound views," said I, with some natural spite, thankful for the opportunity of sending a private arrow into him in passing; "and what does your friend want that I can help him in?"

"The Rector of Estcourt is an old man, and very ill," said Maurice, after a pause of offence;

"Owen, my friend, has a curacy in Simon-borough. I told him I should venture—though of course aware I had not the slightest title to influence you—to name him to Mrs. Crofton, in case of anything happening."

"Aware that you have not the slightest title to influence me—that means, does it not, Maurice?" said I, "that you rather think you have some claim upon that Rectory at Estcourt, and that you magnanimously resign it in favor of your friend? It was your father's—it is your mother's desire to see you in his place—you have thought of it vaguely all your life as a kind of inheritance, which you were at liberty to accept or withdraw from; now, to be sure, we are very, very old friends—is not that plainly, and without any superfluity of words, what you mean?"

Maurice made a still longer pause—he was seized with the restlessness common to men when they are rather hard tested in conversation. He got up unawares, picked up a book off the nearest table, as if he meant to answer me by means of that, and then returned to his chair. Then, after a little further struggle, he laughed, growing very red at the same time.

"You put the case strongly, but I will not say you are wrong," he answered; "after all, I believe, if it must be put into words, that is about

how the thing stands; but, of course, you know I am perfectly aware "——

"Exactly," said I; "we both understand it, and it is not necessary to enter further into that part of the subject; but now, tell me, Maurice, supposing your rights of natural succession to be perfectly acknowledged, why is it that you substitute another person, and postpone your own settlement to his?"

"My dear Mrs. Crofton," cried Maurice, restored to himself by the question, "what would not I give to be able to accept as mine that calm, religious life?—what would not I relinquish for a faith as entire and simple as my friend Owen's? But that is my misfortune. I suppose my mind is not so wholesomely constituted as other people's. I cannot believe so and so, just because I am told to believe it—I cannot shape my creed according to the received pattern. If I could, I should be but too happy; but *quæ voulez-vous?* a man cannot act against his convictions—against his nature."

"Nay, I assure you I am a very calm spectator," said I; "I would not have either one thing or another. I have not the least doubt that you will know better some day, and why should I concern myself about the matter?"

"Why, indeed?" echoed Maurice, faintly; but

he was mortified; he expected a little honor, at the very least, as his natural due, if not a womanish attempt at proselytizing. The discomfiture of my adversary was balm to my eyes—I was, as may be perceived, in a perfectly unchristian state of mind.

“And how then about yourself?—what do you mean to do?” asked I; “you are getting towards the age when men begin to think of setting up houses and families for themselves. Do you mean to be a College Don all your life, Maurice? I fear that must be rather an unsatisfactory kind of existence; and one must take care, if that is the case, not to ask any young ladies again to meet you—some one might happen to be too captivating for your peace of mind—a Miss Reredos might outweigh a fellowship;—such things have been even with men of minds as original as your own.”

“Miss Reredos! ah, she amuses herself!” said Maurice, with a conscious smile.

“Yes, I think you are very well matched,” said I, calmly; “you will not do her much harm, nor she inflict a very deep wound on your heart, but it might have happened differently. People as wise as yourself, when their turn comes, are often the most foolish in these concerns.”

“Ah, you forget that I am past youth,” said

Maurice; "you, Mrs. Crofton, have made a private agreement, I suppose, with the old enemy, but I have no such privilege—I have done with that sort of thing long ago. However, about Owen, if I may remind you, is there anything to say?"

"Somebody asked me for the living of Estcourt when your father lay dying; I was younger then, as you say—I was deeply horrified," said I. "We must wait."

"Ah, yes; but my father was a man in the prime of life, and this is an old man, whom even his own family cannot expect to live long," said Maurice; "but, of course, if you do not like it, I have not another word to say."

"Ah, Maurice," said I, forgetting for a moment the personage who sat before me, and thinking of Dr. Harley's death-bed, and the fatherless children there so helpless and dependent on other people's judgment, "your father was a good man, but he had not the heart to live after he lost his fortune, and your mother is a good woman, but she had not the heart to bring you up poorly and bravely in your own home. They are my dear friends, and I dare speak of them even to you. Why did she send you to that idle uncle of yours, to be brought up in idleness?—you big, strong, indolent man! What is

the good of you, though you are Fellow of Exeter? You might have been of some use in the world by this time if you had lived among your brothers and sisters, a widow's son."

Maurice started—rose up—made a surprised exclamation of my name—and then dropped into his chair again without saying anything. He did not answer me a word. The offence melted out of his face, but he kept his eyes down and did not look at me. I could not tell whether he was angry—I had been moved by my own feelings beyond, for the moment, thinking of his.

"Ask your friend to come and see you here," I said, after an awkward little pause; "say, Mr. Crofton and I will be glad if he will dine with us before you go—perhaps, to-morrow, Maurice, and that will leave him time to get home on Saturday—and we will think about it, should the living of Estcourt fall vacant. Forgive me," I continued, as I rose to go away, "I said more than I ought to have said."

He took my hand and wrung it with an emphatic pressure; what he said I made out only with difficulty, I think it was, "No more than is true."

And I left him with somewhat uncomfortable feelings. I had not the very least right to lecture this young man; quite the other way—for

was not I a woman and an illiterate person, and he Fellow of his College? I confess I did not feel very self-complacent as I left the room. This third confidential interview, in which I had over-passed the prudent limits of friendliness, did not *feel* at all satisfactory. Nevertheless, I was glad to see that Maurice was magnanimous—that he was likely to forgive me—and that possibly there were elements of better things even in his regarding indolence. All which symptoms, though in a moral point of view highly gratifying, made me but feel the more strongly that I had gone beyond due limits, and exceeded the margin of truth-telling and disagreeableness which one is *not* allowed towards one's guests, and in one's own house.

CHAPTER XIII.

It may be allowed to me to confess that I watched during the remainder of that day with a little natural, but extremely absurd curiosity to see "what effect" our conversation had upon Maurice Harley. After I had got over my own unpleasant sensations, I began to flatter myself, with natural vanity, that perhaps I might have "done him good." I had an inkling that it was absurd, but that made very little difference, and I acknowledge that I felt quite a new spur and stimulus of interest in the young man. I listened to his chance observations during the day with an attention which I had never before bestowed upon them. For the moment, instead of simple impatience of his indolence, and virtuous, gentlemanly good-for-nothingness, I began to sympathize somewhat in the lamenting admiration of his friends that so much talent should be lost to the world. Altogether, in my capacity of hostess to Maurice, I was for that day a reformed and penitent person, full of compunction for my

offence. I am obliged to confess, however, that there was no corresponding change upon my guest. Maurice demeaned himself that day exactly as he had done the day before—was as superior, and critical, and indifferent, as much above the common uses of life and motives of humanity as he had ever been. Still, my penitential feelings lasted out the day, and it was not till I perceived how entirely he was laying himself out to charm and captivate Miss Reredos and make up to her for the attentions she had paid him, that I detected myself in the simple-minded vanity of expecting to have “done him good.” The flirtation that evening was so evident, and Maurice threw himself so much more warmly into it than on any former occasion, that we, the spectators, were all roused to double observation. Johnnie sat behind the little table in the corner, with the stereoscope before him, blazing the wildest rage out of his half-hidden eyes upon his brother, and sometimes quite trembling with passion. Alice moved about with a little indignant dilation of her person and elevation of her head—half out of regard to the honor of her “sex,” which Miss Reredos, she supposed, was compromising, and half out of shame and annoyance at the “infatuation” of her brother. And not quite knowing what

this new fervor might portend, I took an opportunity as I passed by Maurice's chair to speak to him quietly—

"Is Miss Reredos, then, to be more attractive than the fellowship?" I said, lingering a moment as I passed.

Maurice looked up at me with a certain gleam of boyish malice and temper in his eye.

"You know we are very well matched, and I cannot do *her* much harm," he said, quoting my own words.

This was the good I had done him—this, out of a conversation which ended so seriously, was the only seed that had remained in that fertile and productive soil, the mind of Maurice Harley, and behold already its fructifications. I went back to my seat, and sat down speechless. I was inexpressibly angry and mortified for the moment. To be sure it was a little private and personal vanity which made the special sting. Yet he had been unquestionably moved by my candid opinion of him, in which very little admiration was mingled with the regret—but had I not piqued *his* vanity as well?

As for Johnnie, having been taken into his confidence, I was doubly alive to the feelings with which he watched his brother. Miss Reredos managed admirably well between the

lover real and the lover make-believe, *her* vanity being of course in play even more decidedly than anybody else's. I believe she was quite deceived by the sudden warmth of Maurice. I believe the innocent young woman fell captive in an instant, not to his fascinations, but to the delusion of believing that she had fascinated him, and that the name of the Fellow of Exeter was that evening inscribed upon her long list of victims; but, notwithstanding, she would not give up Johnnie; I suppose his youthful adoration was something new and sweet to the experienced young lady—the absoluteness of his trust in her and admiration of her was delicious to the pretty coquette, with whom warier men were on their guard. Over Johnnie she was absolute, undisputed sovereign—he was ready to defy the whole world in her behalf, and disown every friend he had at her bidding. Such homage, even from a cripple, was too sweet to be parted with. Somehow, by means of those clever eyes of hers, even while at the height of her flirtation with Maurice, she kept Johnnie in hand, propitiated, and calmed him. I don't know how it is done—I don't think Alice knew either; but I am not sure that a certain instinctive perception of the manner of that skilful double movement did not come natural to Clara Sedgwick, and

stimulate her disgust at the proceeding. If she had not been married so early and been so happy a little wife, Clara might have been a little flirt herself—who knows? I saw that she had an intuition how it was done. •

As for Miss Polly, she could do nothing but talk about the advantages of useful training for girls. “If these poor children should turn out flirts, Clare!” she cried, in dismay. To be sure, Emmy, the pretty one, was only ten and a half—but still if education could hinder such a catastrophe, there was certainly no time to be lost.

Mr. Owen came to dinner next day, according to my invitation. He was a young man, younger than Maurice, and a hundred times more agreeable. He was curate of St. Peter’s, in Simon-borough, where a curate among the multitude of divines congregated about the cathedral, was as hard to find or make any note of as the famous needle in the bundle of hay. And it is very probable that he was not a brilliant preacher, or noted for any gift in particular; but I liked the honest, manful young fellow, who was not ashamed either to do his work or to talk of it when occasion called—nor afraid to marry upon his minute income, nor to tell me with a passing blush and a happy laugh, which became him, what a famous little housekeeper his wife

was, and what fun they had over her economics. Maurice heard and smiled—calm, ineffable, superior—and wished he could only submit his unhappily more enlightened mind to a simple faith like Owen's. And Owen, on his part, was respectful of the dainty disbeliever, and took off his hat to that scepticism, born of idleness and an unoccupied mind, for which I, in my secret heart, for sheer impatience and disgust, could have whipped the Fellow of Exeter. Mr. Owen was as respectful of it as if that pensive negation had been something actual and of solemn importance. He shook his head and talked to me mysteriously of poor Harley. Maurice had rather distinguished himself at college before he sank into his fellowship. His old companions who were of the same standing were a little proud of his scholarly attainments. "He could be anything if he chose," they said to themselves; and because Maurice did not choose, his capabilities looked all the grander. Owen was quite a partisan of Harley. "What a pity it was!" the honest fellow said, "with such a mind, if he could but get right views"——

At which juncture I struck the excellent young man dumb and breathless by uttering aloud a fervent desire and prayer that by some happy chance Maurice should fall in love.

Mr. Owen looked at me for a moment thunderstruck, the words of his own former sensible sentence hanging half-formed about his lips; then, when he had recovered himself a little, he smiled and said, "You have so much confidence in a female preacher? No doubt they are irresistible—but not in matters of doctrine, perhaps."

"No such thing," said I, "I have no confidence in female preachers or religious courtship; but apart from the intense satisfaction which I own I should have in seeing Maurice make, as people say, a fool of himself, that is the only means I see of bringing him back to life."

"To life!" said my new acquaintance, with a lively look of interrogation.

"Oh, I do not mean anything grand; I mean common life, with the housekeeping to be provided for," said I smiling, "and the daily bread, and the other mouths that have to eat it. I daresay, even you yourself, who seem to stand in no such need as Maurice, have found out something in the pleasant jingle you were talking of—of Mrs. Owen's basket of keys."

The young man blushed once more that slight passing color of happiness, and answered gravely, yet with a smile, "It is true, I see what you mean—and it is very possible indeed—but," he

added, stopping abruptly, and looking at his friend, who was in the full tide of flirtation with Miss Reredos, "Mrs. Crofton, look there!"

I shook my head. "Nothing will come of it," said I; "they are amusing themselves."

Condign punishment came upon my head almost as I spoke; I had turned my head incautiously, and Johnnie and Alice had both heard me.

"Amusing themselves!" cried Johnnie, hissing the words into my ears in a whisper. "Amusing! do you suppose that it is anything but her angel-sweetness, Mrs. Crofton, that makes her so forbearing with Maurice—*my* brother? I adore her for it," cried (but in a whisper) the deluded boy.

"Amusing themselves!" cried Alice, raising her head, "and *you* can say so, Mrs. Crofton? Oh, I am ashamed, to think a woman should forget herself so strangely; I could forgive anything—almost anything," said Alice, correcting herself with a blush, "which really sprang from true strong feeling; but flirting—amusing themselves! Oh, Mrs. Crofton!"

"My dear child, it is not my fault," said I, "I have no hand in the matter, either one way or the other."

"Yes, that is true," said Alice, with that lively

impatience and disinclination to suffer a dear friend to rest in an opinion different from her own, which I have felt myself and understood perfectly,—“but you will not see how unworthy it is—how dishonoring to women! That is what wounds me.”

“Is it not dishonoring to men as well?—two are playing at it, and the other creature is accountable likewise. Are you not concerned for the credit of your sex?” said I, turning to Owen.

The young curate laughed, Alice blushed and looked deeply affronted, and Johnnie, turning all the fury of his jealousy upon me, looked as if it would have pleased him to do me some bodily harm. Well, well, one can bear all that—and I am happy to say that I think I accelerated distantly and humbly by this said conversation, the coming on of Maurice Harley's fate.

CHAPTER XIV.

VERY shortly after our little party separated, it was time to go back to London to Derwent's treadmill; our holiday was over—and as Alice had positively declined my invitation to go with us to London, we were again for several months quite separated from our country friends. I heard from them in the meantime various scraps of information, from which I could gather vaguely how their individual concerns went on. Mr. Reredos was again a visitor at the cottage, and Mrs. Harley, who was not in the secret of his previous rejection, wrote to me two or three long, anxious, confidential letters about his evident devotion to her dear girl—and what did I think of it? It was, the good mother said, the position of all others which she would choose for her daughter, if it lay in her decision—a country clergyman's wife, the same position which she herself had held long ago, when Dr. Harley lived, and she was happy!—but she could not make out what

Alice's mind was. Alice was sometimes cordial and sometimes distant to this candidate for her favor—"And I often fear that it will just be with Mr. Reredos as with the rest," said Mrs. Harley, despondingly—"and I like him so much—he reminds me of what her dear father was once—and the connection would altogether be so eligible that I should be very sorry if it came to nothing. Do you think, dear Mrs. Crofton, that you could use your influence with her on this subject? My dear girl is so shocked and disgusted with the idea of people marrying for an establishment, that I really do not venture to say a word to her about her own establishment in life; but *you* know as well as I do, dear Mrs. Crofton, that such things must be thought of, and really this is so thoroughly eligible"—

Alice followed on the same key.

"Mamma teases me again on that everlasting subject, dear Mrs. Crofton; there is some one so completely eligible, she says—and I quite feel it—so entirely eligible that if there was not another in the world! Mamma is provoked, and says if somebody came who was quite the reverse of eligible that I should answer differently—and indeed I am not sure but there is justice in what she says. But do interfere on my behalf, please; I prefer to be always Alice Harley—do, please,

dear Mrs. Crofton, persuade my mother not to worry me, but to believe that I know my own mind."

From which double correspondence I inferred that Mr. Reredos had somehow managed to resume his suit and to make a partisan of Mrs. Harley without giving a desperate and hopeless affront to the pride of Alice, which raised my opinion of his generalship so greatly that I began to imagine there might possibly be some likelihood of success for the Rector—a conclusion which I fear did not gratify me so much as Mrs. Harley had imagined it should.

Along with this information I heard of a sister of Mr. Owen's, who was paying them a visit—of repeated excursions into Simonborough—of Maurice's growing relish for home, and some anxieties on the young man's part about his future life. And Johnnie's book was published—a book which in my wildest imagination I could not have supposed to be produced by the cripple boy, who, out of the cottage, knew nothing whatever of life. Johnnie's hero was a hero who did feats of strength and skill unimaginable—tamed horses, knocked down bullies, fought, rode, rowed, and cricketed, after the most approved fashion of the modern youth, heroical and muscular—and in his leisure hours made love!—such love!—full

of ecstasies and despairs, quite inconceivable to any imagination above twenty—but all enforced and explained with such perfect ingenuousness and good faith that one could have hugged the boy all the time for the exquisite and delightful folly, in which there did not mix an evil thought. Nothing could well be more remarkable than this fiery outburst of confined and restrained life from the bosom of the cripple, to whom all these active delights were impossible—it was profoundly pathetic too, to me. Poor Johnnie! with that fervid imagination in him, how was he to bear the gray life which Alice had predicted—the life which must be his, notwithstanding all his dreams and hopes? How, when it came to that, was he to undergo the downfall of his first miraculous castle in the air, his vain and violent love-passion? Poor heart, foredoomed! would he ever learn to bring the music of Patience, so lovely to those who hear, so hard to those who make it, out of those life-chords which were drawn all awry, beyond the reach of happiness? I was happy myself in those days. I had little desire to think of the marvellous life to come in which all these problems shall be made clear. I could not cast forward my mind beyond this existence—and the strange inequality between this boy's mind and his fate vexed me at the heart.

And so, quite quietly and gradually, the time stole on. I heard nothing more from poor Bertie Nugent, in India; he meant to come home, but he had not yet obtained his leave of absence, and it remained quite uncertain when we should see him. Everything was very quiet at home. Our fighting was over—our national pride and confidence in our own arms and soldiers, revived by actual experience; everything looking prosperous within the country, and nothing dangerous without.

It was at this time that the dreadful news of the Indian mutiny came upon the country like the shock of an earthquake. News more frightful never startled a peaceful people. Faces paled, and hearts sickened, even among people who had no friends in that deadly peril; and as for us, who had relatives and connections to be anxious for, it is impossible to describe the fear that took possession of us. I knew nobody there but Bertie, and he, thank Heaven, was but a man, and could only be killed at the worst; but I had people belonging to me there, though I did not know them; people whom I had heard of for years and years, though I had never seen them; cousins, and such like—Nugents—with women among them—God help us! creatures who might have to bear tortures more cruel than death. The

thought woke me up into a restless fever of horror and anxiety, which I cannot describe. Perhaps I felt the hideous contrast more because of my own perfect safety and happiness, but I could neither sleep by night nor smile by day, for the vision of that horrible anguish which had fallen upon some, and might be—might be—for anything I knew—at any moment—ah! the thought was too much for flesh and blood. It was growing towards autumn, yet I, who hated London, was reluctant that year to leave it. We were nearer to those news which it was so sickening to hear, yet so dreadful to be out of reach of, and it seemed to me as if it would be impossible to go into those tranquil country places, where all was happy, and still, and prosperous, with such a cloud of horror, and fear, and rage about one's heart. At that time I almost think I could have heard without any great additional pang that Bertie himself had been killed. He was a man, thank Heaven, and they could only kill him! Mere family affection was lost for the moment in the overpowering horror of the time.

But the first miseries were over by the time we went to Hilfont—it had begun to be a fight of man to man—that is to say, of one man to some certain number of heathen creatures, from a dozen to a hundred—and the news, breathless

news, mad with gasps of grief, anxiety, and thanksgiving, did not now strike such horror and chill to our blood. We went home and quieted ourselves, and grew anxious about Bertie—very anxious. Of course he was in the thick of the fight. If he had not been, could we ever have forgiven him?—but he was, and we had only to wait, and long, and tremble for news, to catch here and there a glimpse of him through obscure telegraphic reports, and slow dispatches, coming long, long, and slow, after that bewildering, tantalizing snatch of half-comprehensible tidings. Then I saw, for the first time, how thoroughly the young man, though he had been away eight years, kept his hold upon our hearts. Derwent would ride a dozen miles to the railway for a chance of hearing a little earlier than was possible at Hilfont, when the *new* news came in; everybody about the house looked breathless till they heard if the Captain, as they called him, was still safe. As for Alice Harley, I do not remember that she ever asked a question—she went and came about the house, read all the papers, listened to all the conversations, stood by and heard everything, while her sister Clara poured forth inquiry upon inquiry, while the gentlemen discussed the whole matter, and decided what everybody must do; while even Lady Greenfield, drawn towards me,

though we were but indifferent friends, by a common touch of nature (for I cannot deny that she liked her nephews), consulted and argued where Bertie could be now, and wished him safe home. My little Derwent, with a flush on his childish cheeks, and tears in his eyes, cried out against her; "Do you think Bertie will come safe home when they are murdering the women and the babies?" cried Derwie, with a half-scream of childish excitement. "Bertie?—if he did, I would like to kill him; but he never, never, will till they're all on board the ships—he had better be killed than come safe home!"

The tears were in my own eyes, so that I did not see the child very clearly as he spoke; but I saw Alice bend quickly down to kiss him, and heard in the room the sound of one sob—a sound surprised out of somebody's heart. Not Lady Greenfield's, who put her handkerchief to her eyes, and said that really she was only human, and might be forgiven for wishing her own relations safe. Miss Polly had come with her sister-in-law that day—she was paler than ever, the tender old lady. She cried a little as we talked, but it was not out of her calm old heart that such a sob of anguish and passion came.

"My dear," said Miss Polly, speaking as if she addressed me, but not looking in my direction,

"I'm afraid Derwie's right; if he die he must do his duty—there's no talk of being safe in such times."

"It is very easy for you to speak," said Lady Greenfield, and I believe she thought so; "but Clare and I feel differently—he is not a relation of yours."

"I pray for the dear boy, night and morning, all the same. God bless him, at this moment, wherever he may be!" said Miss Polly. I was conscious of a quick, sudden movement as the words fell, soft and grave, from her dear old lips. It was Alice who had left the room.

She could not bear it any longer. *She* did not belong to him—she was not old enough to speak like Miss Polly—she durst not flutter forth her anxiety for her old playfellow as Clara did. Her heart was throbbing and burning in her young warm breast. She did not say a word or ask a question; but when the tender old woman bade God bless him, Alice could stand quiet no longer. I knew it, though she had not a word to say.

CHAPTER XV.

THIS time of anxiety was one which, in that great common interest and grief, drew many people together who had little sympathy with each other in ordinary times. Many a close, private, confidential talk, deluged with tears, or tremulous with hope, I had within these days with many a troubled woman, who up to that time had been only an acquaintance, or very slightly known to me, but who was now ready, at the touch of this magical sympathy, to take me into her heart. Derwent's custom of riding to the railway for the earliest perusable news, and an occasional message by telegraph, which came to him when any important intelligence arrived, made our house besieged by anxious people, to whom the greatest joy of their lives was to find *no* mention in these breathless dispatches of the individual or the place in which they were interested. Nugents, whom I had never heard of, started up everywhere, asking from me information about Bertie and his family. The girls who

had been brought up at Estcourt deluged me with letters asking after him. I am not sure that our entire household did not feel, amid all its anxiety, a little pride in the consciousness of thus having a share in the universal national sympathy which was bestowed so warmly and freely upon all who had friends in India. As for little Derwie, he devoted himself entirely now to the business of carrying news. He knew already by heart the list of all the families—I had almost said in all the county, certainly between Hilfont and Simonborough—who had soldier-sons; and Derwie and his pony flew along all the country roads for days together when news came, the child carrying in his faithful childish memory every detail of the dispatch to the cottage women, who had no other means of hearing it. The people about—that is to say, Miss Reredos and the important people of the village—called my boy the telegraph-boy, and I am not quite sure that I was not rather proud of the name. Whether his news-carrying always did good I will not say—perhaps it was little comfort to the mother of a nameless rank-and-file man to hear that another battle had been won, or a successful march made, in which, perhaps, God knows, that undistinguished boy of hers might have fainted and fallen aside to die. But the common people—God bless

them!—are more hopeful in their laborious hearts than we who have leisure to think all our anxieties out, and grow sick over them.

Derwie flew here and there on his pony, telling the news—possessed with it to the exclusion of every other thought—and I could but be thankful that he was a child, and the telegraph-boy, not a man, able to set out with a heart of flame to that desperate and furious strife.

I surprised a nursery party at this memorable period in the expression of their sentiments. It was somebody's birthday at Waterflag, and all the little people were collected there. Derwent had been telling them of a feat performed in India by a Flintshire man, which all the newspapers had celebrated, and which we were all rather proud of. Derwie, in his capacity of news-boy, read the papers to the best of his ability, with very original readings of the Indian names, but he was much more thoroughly informed than any of the others—by reason of his trade—and they listened to him as to an oracle. Then came an account of the mutiny and all its frightful consequences, as well as Derwie knew. The children listened absorbed, the girls being, as I rather think is very common, much the most greatly excited. Willie Sedgwick, the chubby pink and white heir, who looked so much younger

than Derwie, sat silent, fingering his buttons, and with no remarkable expression in his face; but Miss Polly's two nieces bent down from their height of superior stature to listen, and Clara Sedgwick—lovely little coquette—stood in the middle of the room, arrested in something she had been doing, breathless, her little face burning with the strongest childish excitement. She was not now arrayed in that glorious apparel which had captivated Derwie and myself in the spring. It was only a simple gray morning frock, which was expanded upon her infantine crinoline at this moment; but her beautiful little figure, all palpitating with wonder, wrath, and excitement, was a sight to see.

“Oh!” cried out the child, stamping her little foot, as Derwie, breathless himself, paused in his tale—“oh! if I had only a gun, I would take hold of papa's hand and shoot them all!”

“Ah!” cried Emmy, whose thoughts had been doubtless following the same track, and to whom this sudden sense of a want which, perhaps, she scarcely realized in ordinary times, came sharp in sudden contrast with that exclamation of Clary's—“Ah, Clary!” cried the poor child, with a shrill accent in the momentary pang it gave her, “but we have no papa.” It struck me like a sudden passionate, artless postscript of personal

grief, striking its key-note upon the big impersonal calamity which raised, even in these children's bosoms, such generous horror and indignation.

"He was killed in India," said Di, in a low tone, her womanly little face growing dark with a sudden twilight of feeling more serious than her years.

"They don't want *us* to fight," said Derwie, whom this personal digression did not withdraw from his main interest; "you may be sure, Clary, they don't want a little thing like you, or me, or Willie; to be sure, if we had been older!—but never mind, there's sure to be somebody to fight with when we're big enough; and then there's such famous fellows there—there's Sam Rivers, I was telling you of, that Huntingdonshire man; I know his mother, I'll take you to see her, if you like; and there's Bertie—there's our Bertie, don't you know?—he'll never come home till they're all safe, or till he's killed."

"If he's killed he'll never come back," said Willie Sedgwick.

"Oh, I wish you would go away, you horrid great boy!" cried Clary, indignantly—"Killed! when you know mamma is so fond of Mrs. Crofton's Bertie, and loves him as much as Uncle Maurice!—but Willie doesn't care for anything,"

she said, in an aggrieved tone, turning away from her brother with a disgust which I slightly shared.

"I could bear him to be killed," said Derwie, who, poor child, had never seen the hero he discussed, "if he did something worth while first—like that one, you know, who blew himself up, or that one"——

"But, Derwie, what was the good of blowing himself up," said Clary, with wondering round eyes.

"Don't you see?" cried Derwie, impatiently; "why, to destroy the powder and things, to be sure, that they might not have it to fire at us."

"I'd have poured water all on the powder, if it had been me, and spoiled it without hurting any one," said the prudent Willie.

"As if he had time to think about hurting any one!" said Derwie—"as if he didn't just *do* it—the first thought that came into his head."

"Oh, Derwent!" cried Clary again, "if they were all—every one—ten thousand thousand, standing up before one big gun, and—papa would only take hold of my hand, I would fire it off!"

"Aunty says we should forgive," said Miss Polly's gentle Di, in a low voice; "'tis dreadful to be killed, but it would be worse to kill somebody else."

"I don't think so at all," cried Olary, "I would kill them every one if I could—every one that did such horrid, cruel, wicked things. I hope Bertie will kill ever so many—hundreds! Don't you hope so, Derwie? I would if I were him."

This sanguinary speech was interrupted by an arrival of nurses and attendants, and Olary, quite beautiful in her childish fury, went off to make a captivating toilette for the early child's dinner, where everybody was to appear in gala costume, to do honor to the birthday hero. The elder Clara, the child's mother, had been standing with me in one end of the great nursery, listening to this discussion. She turned round with a laugh when the party had dispersed.

"What a little wretch!" said Clara; "but oh! Mrs. Crofton, isn't it absurd what people say about children's gentleness and sweetness, and all that? I know there is never a story told in my nursery of a wicked giant, or a bad uncle, or anything of that sort, but the very baby, if he could speak, would give his vote for cutting the villain up in little pieces. There never were such cruel imps. They quite shout with satisfaction when that poor innocent giant, who never did any harm that I can see, tumbles down the beanstalk and gets killed—though I am sure that impudent little thief Jack deserves it a great deal

more. But what a memory Derwie has!—and how he understands! I am sure, I hope most sincerely that Bertie, after all, will get safe home. Is there any more news?"

"No more," said I, "I have not heard from himself a long time now—and the public news only keeps us anxious. I am not quite so philosophical as Derwie—few things would make me so thankful as to hear that Bertie was on his way home."

"Oh, I should be so glad!" said Clara, eagerly; then, after a pause and with a smile, "young men who want their friends to get dreadfully interested about them should all go out—don't you think, Mrs. Crofton? There is Alice, for example. I thought everything was coming round quite nicely, and that Alice was going to be quite rational, and *settle* like other people, at last—but just when everything seemed in such excellent train, lo! here came this Indian business, and upset the whole again."

"Upset what? I don't understand what you mean," said I, with a little wonder, partly affected and partly real.

"Oh, Mrs. Crofton! you *do*," cried Clara; "you know mamma and I had just been making up our minds that Mr. Reredos was *the* person, and that all was to be quite pleasant and comfortable. He was *so* attentive, and Alice really

so much better behaved than she had ever been before. Then this Indian business, you know, happened, and she was all in a craze again. She doesn't say much, but I am quite sure it is nothing else that has upset her. Of course, looking at it in a rational way, Bertie and Alice can't *really* be anything to each other. But he's far away, and he's in danger, and there's quite an air of romance about him. And Alice is so ridiculous! I am quite sure in my own mind that this is the only reason why she's so very cool to the Rector again."

"It is very injudicious to say so, Clara," said I; "of course she must be interested—her old playfellow—like a brother to you both; but as for interposing between her and an eligible"—

"Now, please don't be rational," pleaded Clara, "I know exactly what you are going to say—but after all she must marry somebody, you know, and where is the harm of an eligible establishment? Perhaps it would be as well if mamma did not use the word—but still!—oh! to be sure, dear, good, kind Bertie—the children are quite right," said Clara, with a sweet suffusion of kindness and good feeling over all her face—"I am sure I love him every bit as much as I love Maurice—he was always like a brother, the dear fellow! I don't say Alice should not be interested in him; but only it's all her romance,

you know. She's not in love with him—if she were in love with him, I couldn't say a word—it's only sympathy, and friendship, and sisterhood, and all that; and because he's in trouble she'll forget all about herself, and send this good man, who is very fond of her, away."

"These young ladies, you see, Clara," said I, "they are not at all to be depended on; they never will attend to what we experienced people say."

"Ah, yes, that is true," said Alice's younger sister, with a sigh of serious acquiescence, and the simplest good faith.

Clara, with her five babies, had forgotten that she was not her sister's senior—while Alice, for her part, looking down from her quiet observatory in her brown silk dress upon Clara's wonderful toilettes and blooming beauty, felt herself a whole century older than that pretty matron-sister, who was always so sweetly occupied with life, and had so little time for thought. I smiled upon them both, being near twenty years their senior, and thought them a couple of children still. So we all go on, thinking ourself the wisest always. In these days I began to moralize a little. I have no doubt Miss Polly had similar thoughts of me.

CHAPTER XVI.

THAT evening I had the satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) of beholding a very similar condition of things to that which had occupied my attention in my own house at Easter. All the Harleys were at Waterflag, in honor of Willie's birthday, including the pretty little Kate, whose first party this was, and—a more perplexing addition—their mother. Mrs. Harley was exactly what she had always been, but age had made her uncertain mind more uncertain, while it increased her anxiety to have her children "provided for," as she called it. The colder Alice was to Mr. Reredos, the more warmly and tenderly her mother conciliated and courted him. Here was a good match, which might be lost for a caprice, one might have supposed the good woman to be thinking; and it was her duty to prevent that consummation, if possible. Mrs. Harley quite gave herself up to the task of soothing down the temper which Alice had ruffled, and whispering perseverance to the discouraged

suitor. She referred to him on all occasions, thrust his opinions into anything that was going forward, contrived means of bringing him into immediate contact with Alice, which last brought many a little sting and slight to the unfortunate and too well-befriended lover—on the whole, conducted herself as a nervous, anxious, well-meaning woman, to whom Providence has not given the gift of comprehending other people's individualities, might be supposed likely to do. As Mrs. Harley sat in her great chair by the fire in the Waterflag drawing-room, and looked round her upon her children and descendants, I did not wonder that she was both proud and anxious. There was Maurice with a new world of troublous thoughts in his face. I could no more understand what was their cause than I could interfere with them. Was it that dread following out of his investigations into Truth, wherever she might lead him, which he had contemplated with tragical but complacent placidity six months since—or had other troubles, more material, overtaken the Fellow of Exeter? I was somewhat curious, but how could I hope to know? Then there was Johnnie, poor, happy, deluded boy! Miss Reredos was of the company—and while she still saw nobody else who was more likely game, she amused herself with

Johnnie, and overwhelmed his simple soul with joy. His book and his love together had changed him much, poor fellow; he was sadly impatient of being spoken to as a youth, or almost as a child, in the old sympathetic, tender custom which all his family had fallen into. He was jealous of being distinguished in any way from other people, and took the indulgences long accorded to his ill-health and helplessness fiercely, as if they had been so many insults. Poor Johnnie! he thought himself quite lifted above the old warm family affection, which clung so close to the weakest of the flock, by this new imaginary love of his. I wonder what that syren of his imagination felt when she saw what she had done! I imagine nothing but amusement, and a little pleasurable thrill of vanity. Many men made love to Miss Reredos, or had done so during the past career of that experienced young lady; few perhaps had thrown themselves at her feet *tout entier*, like our poor cripple Johnnie. She felt the flattery, though she cared little about the victim. I believe, while she foresaw quite coolly the misery she was bringing on the boy, she yet had and would retain a certain grateful memory of him all her life.

But it appeared that she had either tired of Maurice, or recognized as impracticable her flir-

tation with that accomplished young gentleman. They were on somewhat spiteful terms, having a little passing encounter of pique on the one side and anger on the other, whenever they chanced to come in contact. The pique was on the lady's side ; but as for Maurice, he looked as if it would have been a decided relief to his feelings to do her some small personal injury. There was a kind of snarl in his voice when he addressed her, such as I have heard men use to a woman who had somehow injured them, and whom they supposed to have taken a mean advantage of her woman's exemption from accountability. "If you were a man I could punish you ; but you are not a man, and I have to be polite to you, you cowardly female creature," said the tone, but not the words of Maurice's voice ; and I could discover by that tone that something new must have happened which I did not know of. All the more fervently for the coolness of his mother and sisters to her, and for the constraint and gloomy looks of Maurice, did Johnnie, poor boy, hang upon the words and watch the looks of the enchantress—he saw nobody else in the room, cared for nobody else—was entirely carried beyond all other affections, beyond gratitude, beyond every sentiment but that of the exalted boyish passion which had, to

his own consciousness, changed all his life and thoughts.

And there, on the other hand, was Alice, thwarting all the wishes and inclinations of her friends. Mrs. Harley forgave Johnnie, and turned all her wrath for his foolishness upon Miss Reredos; but she did not forgive Alice for those cold and brief answers, that unapproachable aspect which daunted the Rector, comfortable and satisfactory as was his opinion of himself. I could not help looking at these young people with a passing wonder in my mind over the strange caprices and cross-purposes of their period of life. Maurice, for instance—what was it that had set Maurice all astray from his comfortable self-complacency and *dilettante* leisure? Somehow the pleasure-boat of his life had got among the rocks, and nothing but dissatisfaction—extreme, utter, unmitigated dissatisfaction—was left to the young man, as I could perceive, of all his accomplishments and perfections. Alice was thrusting ordinary life away from her—thrusting aside love, and independence, and “an eligible establishment,” trying to persuade herself that there were other pursuits more dignified than the common life of woman—for—a caprice, Clara said. Johnnie, poor Johnnie, was happy in the merest folly of self-deception that ever in-

nocent boy practised. Alas! and that was but the threshold of hard, sober existence, and who could tell what bitter things were yet in store for them? How hard is life! Perhaps Bertie Nugent at that moment lay stark upon some Eastern field of battle; perhaps he was pledging his heart and life to some of those languid-lively Indian Englishwomen, ever so many thousand miles off—who can tell? And why, because Bertie was in danger, should Alice Harley snub that excellent young Rector, and turn from his attentions with such an air of impatience, almost of disgust? Nobody could answer me these simple questions. Indeed, to tell the truth, I did not ask anybody, but quietly pursued the elucidation of them for myself.

And of course our conversation during the course of the evening ran upon matters connected with India and the last news. Derwent and Mr. Sedgwick held grave consultations on the political aspect of the matter and the future government of India. Miss Reredos shuddered, and put on pretty looks of earnest attention; Clara told the story of the conversation in the nursery; while, in the mean time, Alice expressed her interest neither by look nor word—only betrayed it by sitting stock-still, taking no part in the conversation, and restraining more than was natural

every appearance of feeling. That silence would have been enough, if there had been nothing else, to betray her to me.

But I confess I was surprised to hear the eager part which Maurice took in the conversation, and the heat and earnestness with which he spoke.

"If there is one man on earth whom I envy it is Bertie Nugent," said Maurice, when Clara had ended her nursery story. "I remember him well enough, and I know the interest Mrs. Crofton takes in him. You need not make faces at me, Clara—I don't think he's very brilliant, and neither, I daresay, does Mrs. Crofton; but he's in his proper place."

"Maurice, my dear, the place Providence appoints to us is always our proper place," said Mrs. Harley, with the true professional spirit of a clergyman's wife.

"Oh! just so, mother," said the Fellow of Exeter, with a momentary return of his old, superb, superior smile, "only, you know, one differs in opinion with Providence now and then. Bertie Nugent, however, has no doubt about it, I am certain. I envy him," added the young man, with a certain glance at me, as if he expected me to appreciate the change in his sentiments, and to feel rather complimented that my poor Bertie

was promoted to the envy of so exalted a personage.

"I thought Mr. Maurice Harley despised soldiers," said Miss Reredos, dropping her words slowly out of her mouth, as if with a pleasant consciousness that they contained a sting.

"On the contrary, I think soldiering the only natural profession to which we are born," said Maurice, starting with an angry flush, and all but rudeness of tone.

"Don't say so, please, before the children," cried Clara. "War's disgusting. For one thing, nobody can talk of anything else when it's going on. And then only think what shoals of poor men it carries away, never to bring them back again. Ah, poor Bertie!" cried Clara, with a little feeling, "I wish the war were over, and he was safe home."

"I am not sure that war is not the most wholesome of standing institutions," said Maurice, philosophically. "Your shoals of poor men who go away, and never return, don't matter much to general humanity. There were more went off in the Irish exodus than we shall lose in India. We can afford to lose a little blood."

"Oh, yes, and sometimes it takes troublesome people out of the way," said the Rector's sister—"one should not forget that."

“Extremely true, and very philosophical, for a woman,” said Maurice, with a savage look. “It drains the surplus population off, and makes room for those who remain.”

Clara and her mother, both of them, rushed into the conversation with the same breath as women rush to separate combatants. I should have been very much surprised had I been more deeply interested. But at present I was occupied with that imperturbable, uninterfering quietness with which Alice sat at the table, saying nothing;—how elaborately unconscious and unconcerned she looked!—that was much more important to me than any squabble between Maurice and the Rector’s sister—or than the Rector himself, or any one of the many and various individual concerns which, like the different threads of a web, were woven into the quiet household circle—giving a deep dramatic interest to the well-bred, unpicturesque pose of the little company in that quiet English room.

CHAPTER XVII.

WE stayed all that night at Waterflag, as we always did when we dined with the Sedgwicks, and of course I was subjected to a long private and confidential conversation with Mrs. Harley in my dressing-room, when we both ought to have been at rest. She poured out her anxieties upon me as she had done many a long year ago, when all these young people were unconscious little children, and Dr. Harley, poor good man, was newly dead. Only Time had changed both of us since then—she had become an old woman with silver-white hair under her snowy cap. I was old too, though my boy was but a child, and kept me nearer to youth than belonged to my years; but Mrs. Harley was as glad of this outlet to her anxieties, and felt as much relief in pouring these anxieties forth upon somebody else's shoulders as ever.

“Ah, Clare!” she said, “you have only one, to be sure, and he's nobly provided for; but we're never so happy, though we don't think it,

as when they're all children. There's nothing but measles and such things to frighten one *then*—but *now*!—dear, dear! the charge of all these grown up young people, Clare, is far too much for a poor woman like me. I believe I shall break down all at once, one of these days."

"Let us take it quietly," said I, "they are very good, sensible, well-educated young people—they know what they are doing—don't you think you might trust them to act for themselves?"

"They will, whether I trust them or not," sighed poor Mrs. Harley. "Ah dear! to think how one toils and denies one's self for one's family, and how little account they make of one's wishes when all is done! I think mine have quite set themselves—all but Clara, dear girl, who is so perfectly satisfactory in every way—to thwart and cross me, Alice—you know how unreasonable she is—I can do nothing with her. Just the thing of all others that I could have chosen for her, and such a nice, excellent, judicious young man. You saw how she behaved to him to-night."

"But really, Mrs. Harley, if Alice doesn't like him"—I interposed with humility.

"Oh, nonsense—she does like him—at least, she doesn't like anybody else that I know of—

and why shouldn't she like him?" asked the exasperated mother. "You know, Mrs. Crofton, that my poor income dies with me—and there is Johnnie, poor child, to make some provision for, and when I die what will she do?—though to be sure," concluded Mrs. Harley, drawing herself up a little, "I am not the sort of person to marry my daughters merely for an establishment—that never was my way. This case, you must perceive, Clare, is quite different. He is such a very nice—such an entirely satisfactory person; and the position—I was a clergyman's wife myself, and I would choose that sphere rather than any other for Alice; and as for liking, I really cannot see a single reason why she should not like him, do you?"

"Why, no—except just, perhaps, that—I fear—she doesn't," said I, with hesitation; for I confess this superlative mother's argument quite nonplused me. After all, why shouldn't she like that good, young, handsome Rector? I reserved the question for private consideration, but was a little staggered by the strength of Mrs. Harley's case.

"My opinion is that Alice thinks it rather a merit to refuse an eligible person," said Mrs. Harley—"like all these young people. There is Maurice, too—you will not believe it, Clare—

but Maurice has actually had the folly to fall in love with Francis Owen's sister in Simonborough. I could not believe my ears when I heard of it first. Maurice, who has always been such a very prudent boy! She is a very nice, pretty girl, but, of course has not a penny—and Maurice has nothing but his fellowship. It is a pretty mess altogether. In the very best view of the case, if Maurice even had been content to think like other people, and had a nice living waiting for him, they might both have done better—he might have done a *great* deal better at least. But, no!—when they find somebody quite unsuitable, that is the very thing to please young people in these days; and there is my son, Clare—my eldest son—who was never intended for any profession but the Church—actually broaching all kinds of wild schemes about work, and talking of going to Australia, or taking a laborer's hod, or any other wild thing he can think of; it is enough to break my heart!"

"Then do you mean that Maurice intends to throw up his fellowship, and marry?" said I, thinking this too good news to be true.

Mrs. Harley shook her head.

"It is all a muddle," she said, "there is no satisfaction at all in it; she thought he flirted with Miss Reredos, and he thought she flirted with

some of the officers ; and Miss Reredos has such a grudge at him for falling in love with anybody but herself, that she did all she could to help them to a quarrel ; and a very good thing, too, for of course they never would have been so mad as to marry, and I dislike long engagements exceedingly ; only since then it is really almost impossible to endure Maurice in the house. He is *so* ill-tempered, it is really quite dreadful. I am sure, when I was young, I never gave my parents any uneasiness about me, yet my two eldest children seem to think it quite an amusement to worry me out of my life."

"Let us believe they don't do it on purpose," said I ; "troubles never come single, you know—and I daresay this is the most critical time of their life."


"Ah, Alice should have had all these affairs over long ago!" said Mrs. Harley, disapprovingly ; "Alice is seven and twenty, Mrs. Crofton—she ought to have been settled in life years ago. I am sure, considering all the opportunities she has had, it is quite disgraceful. I can't help feeling that people—her father's friends, for instance—will blame me."

I found it difficult not to smile at this refinement of maternal anxiety, but after a while succeeded in soothing the good mother, whose mind

•

was evidently eased by the utterance, and persuading her that everything would come right. She went away shaking her head, but smiling through her anxious looks. She laid down her burden at my door, and left it there. When she had gone I took up my portion of it with sundry compunctions. Bertie Nugent had been seven years away—when he went away Alice was scarcely twenty. They had of course been very much in each other's society before this, but seven years is a long break, even for lovers. These two were not lovers; and was not Clara right when she stigmatized as the merest foolish romance any interest which Alice might have in her long-departed and indifferent playfellow? I began to blame myself for cherishing in my own mind the lingering hope that my wishes might still be accomplished concerning them. Perhaps that hope had, by some subtle means, betrayed itself to Alice, and had helped to strengthen her in her natural perversity and the romance of that vague visionary link which existed only in her mind and mine. I have known very similar cases more than once in my life—cases in which a childish liking, kept up only by chance inquiries or friendly messages at long intervals on one side or the other, has forestalled the imagination of the two subjects of it so completely,

that both have kept from all engagements for years, until at long and last, encountering each other once again, they have discovered themselves to have loved each other all this time, and married out of hand. This vague sort of tie, which is no tie, has a more captivating hold upon the mind than a real engagement; but then it might come to nothing. And after an interval of seven years, was it not everybody's duty to turn the dreamer away from that romantic distance to the real ground close at hand? I had considered the question many times with too strong a regard for Bertie (who, to be sure, had no particular solicitude about the matter, or he might have been home long ago) in my thoughts. Now I rather changed my point of view. If Alice liked Bertie, it was purely a love of the imagination. Why, for that Will-o'-the-wisp, was she to keep dreaming in the twilight while the broad daylight of life and all its active duties were gliding out of her reach? I resolved to bestir myself and startle Alice into common sense and ordinary prudence. Here was she, letting youth pass her, not perceiving how it went, looking so far away out of her horizon to that fantastic, unreal attraction at the other end of the world. Thinking over it I grew more and more dissatisfied. She was wrong to entertain,



I was wrong to encourage, so uncomfortable a piece of self-delusion. It is true, Bertie was in danger, and surrounded with a flush of interest and anxiety which doubled his claims on everybody who knew him. Still it must not be permitted to continue—she must be roused out of this vain imaginary attachment which blinded her to the love that sought her close at hand. Why did she not like the Rector? I resolved to be at the bottom of that question, which I could not answer, before twenty-four hours were out.

CHAPTER XVIII.

BUT who can tell what is to happen within twenty-four hours? When I left my dressing-room next morning, I found Derwent lingering in the corridor outside, waiting for me. He carried in his hand one of those ominous covers which thrill the hearts of private people with fears of evil tidings. He had been half afraid to bring it into me, but he did not hide either the startling hieroglyphics which proclaimed the nature of the dispatch, nor his own distressed and sorrowful face.

"What is the matter?" I cried, in breathless alarm, when I saw him; "something has happened!"

"I fear so," said Derwent; "but softly—softly, Clare; in the first place it is not absolutely his name, and there are such perpetual mistakes by this confounded telegraph. Softly, softly, Clare."

I had seized the dispatch while he was speaking—I read it without saying a word—did I not know how it would be?—ah, that concise, dread-

ful, murderous word—killed! I knew it the moment I saw Derwent's face.

"But, my love, it is not his name—look! it absolutely may be somebody else and not Bertie," cried my husband.

Ah, Bertie! the sound of his dear, pleasant, homely name overcame me. There was no longer any Bertie in the world! I had borne the dreadful excitement of reading the dispatch, but I lost my self-command entirely when all the world of love and hope that had lived in him came before me in his name—it went to my heart.

Long after, Derwent returned to point out the possibilities, which I had no heart to find out. I heard him languidly—I had made up my mind at once to the worst. One hopes least when one's heart is most deeply concerned; but still my mind roused to catch at the straw, such as it was. The telegraph reported that it was Captain N. Hugent who was killed. It was a very slight travesty to rest any confidence upon; but then Bertie was Lieutenant-Colonel, lately breveted. I refused to listen for a long time; but at last the hope caught hold of me. Derwent recalled to my recollection so many other errors—even in this very dispatch the name of one place was quite unrecognizable. When I did re-

ceive the idea into my head, I started up, crying for an Army List. Why did they not have one in Waterflag? It was afternoon then, and the day had gone past like a ghost, without a thought of our return home, or of anything but this dismal piece of news. Now I put my bonnet on hurriedly, and begged Derwent to get the carriage. We had a list at home. We could see if there was anybody else whose name might be mistaken for our dear boy's.

A pale afternoon—a ghostly half twilight of clouds and autumn obscurity. I went into Clara's favorite sitting-room, where she was by herself, to bid her good-bye, unable to bear the sight of the whole family, especially of Mrs. Harley, and the sympathy, sincere though it was, which she would give me. That miserable morsel of hope, which I did not believe in, yet trusted to, in spite of myself, raised to a fever my grief and distress. The deepest calamity, which is certain, and not to be doubted, is so far better than suspense, that it has not the burning agitation of anxiety to augment its pangs. I went into Clara's room with the noiseless step of a ghost, impelled by I cannot tell what impulse of swiftness and silence. Clara was crying abundantly for her old playfellow. Alice, as I did not observe at the time, but remembered afterwards, was not

to be seen that day, and never came to whisper a word of consolation to me, nor even to bid me good-bye. I put my veil aside for a moment to kiss Clara. "Oh, Mrs. Crofton! it will turn out to be somebody else!" cried Clara, with her unreasoning impulse of consolation. I wrung the little hand she put into mine and hurried away. Ah! God help us! if it was not Bertie it must be somebody else—if we were exempted, other hearts must break. Oh, heavy life! oh, death inexorable! some one must bear this blow, whether another household or our own.

We hurried back to Hilfont, all very silent, little Derwie leaning back in his corner of the carriage, his eyes ablaze, and not a tear in them; the child was in the highest excitement, but not for Bertie's life—panting to know, not that the cousin whom he had never seen was saved, but that something noble and great had been done by this hero of his childish imagination. As for my husband, I knew it was only in consideration of my weakness that he had remained all day inactive. I saw him look at his watch, and lean out to speak to the coachman. I knew that he would continue his journey to town as fast as steam could carry him. I felt certain Derwent could not rest without certain news.

When we reached home, I hastened at once, in

advance of them all, to the library, where I knew that Army List was. I remember still how I threw the books out of my way till I found it, and how, with a haste which defeated its own object, I ruffled over the leaves with my trembling hands. I found nothing like Bertie's name—nothing that could be changed into that Captain N. Hugent in all his regiment. I threw the book away from me and sunk upon a chair, faint and giddy. My hopes had grown as I approached to the point of resolving them; now they forsook me in a moment. Why should I quarrel with that inevitable fate? Why should we be exempted, and no other? Long and peaceful had been this interregnum. Years had passed since grief touched us—now it was over, and the age of sorrow had begun again.

“I have only a minute to spare,” said Derwent, looking over the list himself, with a grave and unsatisfied face; “of course I must go to town immediately, Clare, and see if any more information is to be had. But look here! it is not so much the mistake of name as of rank which weighs with me; military people, you know, are rigid in that respect. Had it been Colonel, I should not have questioned the transposing of the initials; but see! he is registered as Major even here.”

"Don't say anything, Derwent," said I; "let me make up my mind to it. Why should not we have our share of suffering as well as so many others? Do not try to soothe me with a hope which you don't feel."

"My dear, if I were not so anxious, I should be sure of it," said Derwent. "I am very hopeful even now. And, Clare," said my husband, stopping sorrowfully to look at me, "grieved as we are, think, at the most, it might have been worse still—it might have been your own son."

I turned my head away for the moment, with something of an added pang. My boy Bertie!—he was not my son—he did not even look so very, very much younger than I, now-a-days, as he had been used to do; yet he was my boy, kindred in blood and close in heart. Little Derwent stood by, listening up to this moment in silence. Now he spoke.

"Mamma, are you sorry?" cried the child; "our Bertie would not die for nothing, if he did die. Is it for Bertie, because he's been a brave soldier that you cry? Then how will you do, mamma, when *I'm* a man?"

How should I do? I clasped my son close in my arms and wept aloud. His father went away from us with a trembling lip, and tears in

his eyes. My heart groaned and exulted over the child, who felt himself a knight and champion born. Ah! what should I do when he was a man? What would every one do who loved Derwie, if death and danger came in the way of *his* duty? But some such men bear charmed lives.

Derwent went away that day to do all that was possible towards ascertaining the truth. We were left alone in the house, Derwie and I. My boy kept by me all day, unfolding to me the stores of his wonderful childish information—what in my pride and admiration I had been used to call Derwie's gossip. He did not console, nor suggest consolation; but the heart swelled in his child's bosom to think of some great thing which he had yet to hear of, that Bertie had done. He was entirely possessed with that idea; and by-and-by his enthusiasm breathed itself into his mother also. I began to bear myself proudly in the depths of my grief. "Another for England!" I said in my heart: Ah! more than for England, for humanity, nature, our very race and blood. If Bertie had died to deliver the helpless from yonder torturing demons, could we grudge his life for that cause? So I tried to stifle down my fond hopes for my chosen heir—to put Alice Harley and Estcourt aside out of my mind, that nothing might come between me and our dearest young hero. He

was killed. That murderous chariot of war had gone over him, and extinguished those fair and tender prospects out of this world ; but not the praise nor the love, which should last for ever.

So I thought, waiting for further tidings, persuading myself that I had no other expectation than to hear that fatal dispatch confirmed—yet cherishing I cannot tell what unspoken, unpermitted secret hopes at the bottom of my heart.

Some days of extreme suspense ensued. Derwent found no satisfaction in London ; but remained there in order to get the first news that came. Heavily those blank hours of uncertainty went over us. Lady Greenfield came to Hilfont, and she and I grew friends, as we mingled our tears—friends for the first time. All my other neighbors distressed me with inquiries or condolences. Some wondered I went to church on the next Sunday, and was not in mourning. Nobody would let me alone in my anxiety and grief. I had a visit almost every day from Clara Sedgwick, who came in crying, as if that would console me, and hung upon my neck. I was far too deeply excited to take any comfort out of Clara's caresses ; perhaps, if truth must be told, I was a little bored with demonstrations of affection, to which, uneasy and miserable as I was, I could make so little response.

Then came the day for news—the dread day,

when all secret hopes which might be lurking in our hearts were to receive confirmation or destruction, the last being so very much the most probable. I felt assured that if the news was favorable, Derwent would return that day, and waited with a beating heart for the dispatch, which I knew he would not delay a moment in sending me. The news came—alas! such unhappy no-news! The same perplexing, murderous information, simply repeated without a single clue to the mistake, whatever it was. I sank down in my chair, with an overpowering sickness at my heart while I read—sickness of depressed hope, of disappointment of a conviction and certainty which crushed me. The repetition somehow weighed heavily with my imagination. I could no longer either deny or doubt the truth of it. It was all over. There was no more Bertie Nugent of Estcourt now to maintain the name of my fathers; so many hopes and dreams were ended, and such a noble, fresh young life, full of all good and generous impulses, was finished for ever.

“I fear—I fear, Derwie, my darling—I fear it must be true,” said I.

“But what did he do? Bertie did not die for nothing, mamma—is it not in the paper what he *did*?” cried Derwie.

❧ If it had been, perhaps one could have borne it better. If he had died relieving a distressed garrison, or freeing a band of agonized fugitives, and we had known that he did so, perhaps—perhaps—it might have been easier to bear. I sat down listlessly in the great window of the breakfast-room. Something of the maze of grief came over me. If I had seen him coming through the avenue yonder, crossing the lawn, approaching to me with his pleasant smile, I should not have wondered. Death had separated Bertie from the limits of place and country—he was mysteriously near, though what remained of him might be thousands of miles away.

Thus I sat languidly looking out, and saying over in my heart those verses which everybody must remember who has ever been in great trouble—those verses of *In Memoriam*, in which the poet sees the ship come home with its solemn, silent passenger, and yet feels that if along with the other travellers he saw the dead man step forth—

“And strike a sudden hand in mine,
And ask a thousand things of home;—

“And I should tell him all my pain,
And how my life had drooped of late,
And he should sorrow o’er my state,
And marvel what possessed my brain;

“And I perceived no touch of change,
No hint of death in all his frame,
But found him all in all the same,
I should not feel it to be strange.”

Wonderful subtle intuition of the poetic soul! Who does not know that strange contrast of death and life? A week ago, and had I seen Bertie from that window, I should have hailed his appearance with the wildest amazement. But I should neither have wondered nor faltered had I seen him this day; on the contrary, would have felt in my heart that it was natural and fit he should be there.

But I did not see Bertie. I saw far off a homely country gig driving up rapidly towards the house, and strained my eyes, wondering if it could be Derwent, though he had sent me no intimation of his return. As it came closer, however, I saw that one of the figures it contained was a woman's, and at last perceived that my visitors were no other than Alice Harley and her brother Maurice. I started nervously up, and hid away my dispatch, for I trembled to see my dear girl. What had she to do coming here?—she who could not ask after his fate with calmness, and yet to the bottom of her maiden heart felt that she had *no right* to be concerned.

Alice was very pale—I could see the nervous

trembling over her whole frame, which she subdued painfully, and with a nervous force, as she came in. Though her voice would scarcely serve her to say the words, she made an explanation before she asked if I had any news. "My mother sent me," said Alice, with bare childish simplicity, but with that breathless gasp in her voice which I knew so well—gasp of utter despair at the thought of enduring that suspense, and concealing it for five minutes longer—"to know if you had any further news—if you had heard," she added, with a convulsive calmness, casting at me a fiery glance, defiant of the compassion she saw in my face. I saw she meant to say his name, to show me how firm she was, but nature was too much for Alice—she concluded hurriedly in the baldest, briefest words—"anything more?"

I shook my head, and she sank into the nearest seat—not fainting—people do not faint at such moments—kept alive and conscious by a burning force of pain.

"Only the same miserable news over again," said I, "with the same mistake in the name; letters must come, I fear, before we can know—but I am afraid to hope."

A little convulsive sound came from Alice's breast—she heard it herself, and drew herself up

after it to hide the wound still if she could. Maurice, too, was greatly affected, though he could scarcely be said to have known Bertie; he walked about the room in his careless man's way, doing everything in the world without intending it, to make that composure we two women had wound ourselves up to, impossible—making his lamentations as he paced about from table to table, picking up all the books to look at them as he went and came.

“Poor Nugent!” said Maurice—“poor honest fellow!—he was not very brilliant, but people liked him all the better for that. What a bright frank face he had—what a laugh! I shall never hear anybody laugh so heartily again. And to think of a fellow like that, and hundreds more, sacrificed to these black demons! Good heavens! and we sitting here at home idling away our lives!”

“Ah, my Bertie!” cried I, out of my heart, “and no one left behind him to bear his name—nobody to mourn for him except ourselves—nobody belonging to *him*! If there is one thing a man has a right to in life and death, it is surely a woman's tears.”

I did not think what I was saying. The words were scarcely out of my lips when an overpowering burst of tears broke through all the painful reserve and forced calmness of Alice. She cov-

ered her face with her hands, hid her head, drew her veil frantically over her passionate weeping. But the flood would have its way, and she could not stop it. I dried my own tears to look on almost with awe at that outburst of controlled and restrained nature. My poor Bertie! the last sad right of a man had fallen to him unawares; he had that mournful possession, all to himself, poured forth upon the grave of his youth with a fulness that knew no reserve—a woman's tears!

Maurice stood by overwhelmed with surprise; he looked at his sister—he grew crimson up to his hair—he drew back a step as if he felt himself an intruder spying upon this unsuspected grief. Then he retired to the bookcase at the other side of the room, with an appealing glance at me. I followed him softly, Alice being far too entirely absorbed to observe us for the moment.

“What does it mean—was there anything between them?” asked Maurice, in my ear.

“They were playfellows and dear friends,” said I; “you know how Clara feels it too.”

“Not like *that*,” said Maurice, once more growing red, as he turned to the books in the shelves—he stood there absorbed in these books, taking out some to examine them, showing himself entirely occupied with this investigation till Alice had recovered her composure. She

looked up at me with a guilty, pale face when she had wept out her tears ; and I was comforted that she saw her brother coldly standing in the background with his back to us and a book in his hand. I had never been so pleased with Maurice before.

"You are not well, my dear child," said I, "I will bring you some wine, and you must rest a little. Thank you for remembering him, Alice. Now we can give him nothing but tears."

Alice, all pale, miserable, and abashed, gasped forth something of which I could only distinguish the words "playfellow" and "old friend."

"I was saying so—you were like his sisters, Clara and you," said I, out loud to reach Maurice's ear.

Alice looked up in my face, now that she had betrayed herself. I thought she was almost jealous that I did not understand her—that I really believed these were, like Clara's, friendly and sisterly tears.

What could I do ? I hushed her, drawing her head to my breast. I could say nothing,—he was gone—he could neither learn what love was bestowed upon him nor return it. Words could no longer touch that secret matter which was made holy by Bertie's grave.

"Look here, Mrs. Crofton," said Maurice,

turning round upon me, when he saw I had left Alice's side, with the Army List in his hand ; " it is not in Nugent's regiment, certainly, but the 53d is in India, too—look here."

I looked with little interest, believing it only a kind expedient to break up the trying situation in which we all stood. It was a name which Maurice pointed out, the name entirely unknown to me, of Captain Nicolas Hughes.

" What of it?" said I, almost disposed to think he was making light of our trouble.

" Captain N. Hughes—Captain N. Hugent—the mistake might be quite explainable ; at least," said Maurice, putting up the book, " at least with such a similarity we ought not yet to despair. Alice we'll go home now. I daresay Mrs. Crofton has too many visitors just at present, and my mother will be anxious to hear. Dear Mrs. Crofton," said the young man, in whom I could not recognize that Fellow of Exeter, grasping my hand warmly, " don't despair."

And Alice, with a painful blush on her cheeks, and her veil over her face, followed him out without a word. I took but faint hope from the suggestion of that name ; but if it were possible—if still we might hope that Bertie was spared—never would Alice Harley forgive him for that outburst of tears.

.

CHAPTER XX.

DERWENT had not yet returned, and I could understand perfectly why he waited, uneasy for further news, or at least for some explanation of that which we had already heard. I waited also, spending the days sadly, but giving up hope, and consequently in a state of anxiety less painful. Sometimes, indeed, Derwie thrust me back into my fever of suspense by his oft-repeated wonder that there should be no news yet of that feat of arms which had cost Bertie his life. The child could not and would not understand how the bravest may perish by some anonymous undistinguished shot, as well as the coward; nor believe that "Bertie had died for nothing," as he said. And sometimes that name which Maurice Harley pointed out to me wavered through my memory for hours together, and upset my calm. Captain Nicolas Hughes—who was he? I wondered, musing at the window, with still that vague thrilling thought at my heart that it would not surprise me to see Bertie

coming across the lawn. Was he young, perhaps, and had mother and sisters at home breaking their hearts with an anxiety kindred to our own—or, harder still, perhaps a wife trembling to believe that her children had no father? Alas! alas! who could choose to be delivered one's-self at the cost of another's heartbreak? God's will be done, whatever it was! *He* knew, though we did not. There was nothing else to say.

A few days after I had an unexpected, and, I am grieved to say, not very welcome visit from Mrs. Harley. I had shunned seeing her hitherto, afraid alike of her condolences over a sorrow which I had not consented to, or her weak encouragements of a hope in which I durst not believe. Had it been possible to so old a friend, I would have denied myself, when I saw the same gig in which Maurice had driven Alice—a convenient rural vehicle belonging to a farmer close by her house—driving up once more to Hilfont with Mrs. Harley; but as, in spite of thirty years' close friendship, the good woman would still have set this down as a slight to her poverty, I did not venture to refuse her admittance. She came in with her best conventional look of sympathy, shook my hand with emphasis, and gave me a slow lingering kiss; did

all those things by which our friends mark their profound consciousness of our sorrow, and readiness to receive our confidence. I, for my part, was disposed to say very little on the subject. There was no more news—nothing to say. I was afraid to speculate, or to have any speculations upon this, which none of us could elucidate. It was best to leave it in silence while we waited—time enough to speak when all was secure.

Yet when I saw that Mrs. Harley's sympathy was the merest superficial crust overlaid upon her own perennial anxieties, I am not sure that I was pleased. One feels it impossible that one's friends can feel for one fully; yet one is disappointed, notwithstanding, when one perceives how entirely occupied they are with the closer current of their own affairs. Mrs. Harley had no sooner expressed her feeble affliction over "the sad calamity," than she forsook that subject for a more interesting one; and it was a little grievous to be called upon to adjudicate in favor of Alice's lover, just after I had looked with respect and sympathy on Alice's tears.

"My dear Mrs. Crofton, I am sure I would not for the world trouble you with my affairs, when you are in such deep affliction," said Mrs. Harley, doing of course the very thing she

deprecated; "but I am in such anxiety about Alice; and really Mr. Reredos is so very urgent that I no longer know what to say to him. I ventured to give him an intimation, a few weeks ago, that Alice was rather inclining towards him, as I thought—and of course the poor young man redoubled his attentions; and now, whether it is mere perversity or dislike, or what it is, I cannot tell, but from that time Alice has treated him with such indifference, not to say disdain, that I am at my wit's end."

"It would have been better to have said nothing to the Rector without Alice's consent," said I, languidly, yet not without a certain satisfaction in piercing my visitor with this little javelin. Mrs. Harley shook her head and wiped her eyes.

"It is so easy to say so," said the troubled mother, "so easy to think what is best when one's own heart is not concerned; But if I *was* wrong I cannot help it now—Alice is so very unreasonable. She cannot endure the very sight of Mr. Reredos now—it is extremely distressing to me."

"I am very sorry to hear it, Mrs. Harley, but you know I cannot help you," said I.

"Oh! my dear Clare, I beg your pardon a thousand times for troubling you when you have

such distressing news, but you know quite well you are all-powerful with Alice. Then another thing, Clara tells me that dear Bertie—dear fellow!—I am sure I loved him like a child of my own—had something to do with her sister's behavior to the Rector—not that they were in love, you know, only some old childish friendship that the dear girl remembered when he was in danger. Do you think there is anything in it, Clara? Can that be the reason? but you know of course it is quite nonsense. Why, they have not met for eight years!"

"That proves it must be nonsense, to be sure," said I; "but excuse me, Mrs. Harley, this dear boy who is gone was very dear to me—I cannot mingle his name in any talk about other people. I beg your pardon—I can't indeed."

"Dear, dear, it is I who should beg your pardon," cried Mrs. Harley, in great distress; "I am sure I did not mean to be so selfish; but you used to be very fond of Alice, Clare—fonder of her than of any one else, though I say it. Long ago you would not have turned off anything that was for the poor girl's good."

"You know I am as fond of Alice as ever I was—what do you want me to do?" cried I.

"Oh, nothing, Clare, dear—nothing but a little good advice," said Mrs. Harley. "If it

should happen to be dear Bertie whom she has set her thoughts upon, just because he was in danger, as girls will do, and refusing other eligible offers, and throwing away quite a satisfactory match and suitable establishment, wouldn't you speak to her, dear Clare? Her dear papa had such confidence in you that you would always be a friend to his girls—he said so many a time, long before we knew what was going to happen. You have such influence with all my children, Mrs. Crofton—almost more than their mother has. Do represent to Alice how much she's throwing away—and especially, alas! *now*."

This emphasis was rather too much for my patience.

"You forget," I said, "that Alice is able to judge for herself—she is not a girl now"—

"She is seven and twenty, Mrs. Crofton—do you mean to reproach her with her age?" said Mrs. Harley, with an angry color rising on her face.

"Reproach her! for what?" said I, constrained to laugh in the midst of my grief. "Why will you tease Alice, and yourself, and me? She is very well—she is," I added, with a little gulp, swallowing my better knowledge, "quite contented and happy—why will you torture her into marrying? She is quite satisfied to be as she is."

“Ah, Clare—but I have so many children to provide for!” cried poor Mrs. Harley, with a gush of tears.

This silenced me, and I said no more. But Mrs. Harley had not exhausted her budget of complaints.

“And Maurice,” said this unfortunate mother; “after the education he has had, and all the money and pains that have been expended on him—Maurice, I do believe, Mrs. Crofton, will do something violent one of these days; he will go into business, or,” with another outburst of tears, “set himself to learn a trade.”

“Surely nothing quite so bad as that,” said I, with as much sympathy as I could summon up.

“Ah, you don’t know how he speaks—if you could only hear him; and the troubles in India and this last dreadful news have had such an effect upon Maurice,” said Mrs. Harley; “you would suppose, to hear him speak, that the poor soldiers had suffered all the more because he was doing nothing. Such nonsense! And instead of going into the Church in a proper and dignified manner, like his dear father, I see nothing better for it but that he’ll make a tradesman of himself.”

“But it would be satisfactory to see him doing something for himself—improving his own posi-

tion ; he can never settle and make a home for himself while he has only his Fellowship. Don't you think Maurice is right?" said I, keeping up the conversation from mere politeness, and already sufficiently tired of the interruption it made.

"He has his mother's house," said Mrs. Harley, a little sharply, "and he has the position of a gentleman," she added a moment after, in a faltering, apologetic tone. Good, troubled woman! She had come to that age of conflicting interests when the instincts of the heart do not always guide true. She wanted—very naturally—to see her daughter provided for ; and so, if she could, would have persuaded Alice into an unwilling marriage. She could not bear to see her son derogating from the "position" which his father's son ought to fill ; and as he would not go into the Church, she would fain have condemned the young man to shrivel up into the dreary dignity of a College Don. Poor Mrs. Harley!—that was all that the philosophy of the affections instructed her to do.

She had scarcely left me half an hour when I was startled by the appearance of the Rector. He was grave and pale, held my hand in his tight grasp, and made his professions of sympathy all very properly and in good taste. But his looks and his tone aggravated a sick impatience

of sympathy which began to grow about my heart. I began to comprehend how people in deep and real grief, might grow disgusted with the conventional looks expected from them, and learn an almost levity of manner, to forestall those vulgar, dreary sympathies; and this sympathy, too, covered something very different—something a great deal nearer to the Rector's heart.

“It may seem to you a very indelicate question—I beg your pardon, Mrs. Crofton—I ask it with great diffidence—but I do not hesitate to confess to you that my own happiness is deeply concerned,” said Mr. Reredos, blushing painfully—and I knew at once, and recognized with a certain thrill of impatience and disgust, what he was going to ask; “Miss Harley and the late Captain Nugent were almost brought up together, I have heard; will you forgive me asking if there was any attachment—any engagement between them?”

“*Colonel* Nugent, please!” said I, I fear rather haughtily; “and it is surely premature to say the late, as I trust in Heaven we shall yet have better news.”

“I beg your pardon,” repeated the Rector, quickly, “I—I was not aware—but might I ask an answer to my question?”

“If there was any engagement between Alice and my dear Bertie?—none whatever!” cried I, with all my might—“nothing of the kind! Pardon me, you have *not* been delicate—you have *not* considered my feelings—if Alice has been unfavorable to you, it is for your own merits, and not on his account.”

I was half sorry when I saw the grave, grieved, ashamed expression with which this other young man turned away. He bowed and was gone almost before I knew what I had said—I fear not without an arrow of mortification and injured pride tingling through the love in his heart.

CHAPTER XXI.

AND after all, the Rector was premature—we were all premature, lamenting for him over whom we were so speedily to rejoice. When Derwent put the dispatch into my hand (he did not send, but brought it, to make more sure), I could not read the words for tears. My eyes were clear enough when I saw that terrible *killed*, in which we believed to read Bertie's fate. But the dear boy's own message, in rapid reply to one which Derwent, out of my knowledge, had managed to have sent to him, floated upon me in a mist of weeping. The truth came inarticulate to my mind—I could neither see, nor scarcely hear the words in which it was conveyed.

But, alas ! alas ! it *was* Captain Nicholas Hughes who had fallen, instead of Bertie. I inquired all that I could learn about this unknown soldier, with a remorseful grief in the midst of my joy, which I cannot describe. I could not join in the tumult of exultation which rose round

me. I could not forget that this news, which came so welcome to us, brought desolation upon another house. I could not think of him but as Bertie's substitute, nor help a painful, fantastical idea that it was to our prayers and our dear boy's safety that he owed his death. I was almost glad to find that the widow whom he had left behind him had need of what kind offices we could do her for the bringing up of her children, and vowed to myself, with a compunction as deep as it was, no doubt, imaginary, that she should never want while Estcourt remained mine. Was it not their dismal loss and bereavement which had saved the heir of my father's house?

"It is the fortune of war," said Derwent, when he learned, to his profound amazement, this idea which had taken possession of me. "It is the will of God," said Captain Hughes's pale widow, lifting her tearful face to me, from under the heavy veil of her mourning. So it was—but sharp and poignant is the contest between grief and joy.

"See what your despised telegraph can do, after all!" cried Derwent, rejoicing with all his honest heart over the news he had brought.

"But, ah! if Bertie's friend had been poor!" said I. "How many souls do we wring with additional pangs, to have our anxiety dispelled the

more easily? Think of the news of a battle, with so many killed and wounded—and some dreadful fortnight, or maybe month, to live through before one knows whether one's own is dead or alive. No, 'tis a cruel earthly Geni, and not a celestial Spirit—it does good now and then, only because it cannot help it—relieves us, Derwent, but slaughters poor Mrs. Hughes.”

“I believe Clare is not half-content—nobody must be killed to satisfy you women—but, unfortunately that will not do in this world,” said Derwent. “We have to be thankful for our own exemption, without entering too deeply into other people's grief. And most of us find that philosophy easy enough.”

“Most of us are very poor creatures,” said Maurice Harley, sententiously. He came alone to make his inquiries this time. Alice was invisible, and not to be heard of. I could not see her even when I called at the cottage. She had taken overpowering shame to herself, and shrank from my eyes. It was her brother who carried our news to his mother's house—carried it, as I discovered incidentally, with the rarest and most delicate care for her—rigidly keeping up the fiction of supposing her not to care for it, nor to be specially interested, any more than for her old playfellow. He was ill at ease himself, and dis-

tracted with questions no longer of a *dilettante* kind. In my eyes this increased his kindness all the more.

"Yes, we are poor creatures the most of us," repeated Maurice, when my husband—who did not notice any particular improvement in the Fellow of Exeter, and was disposed to be contemptuous, as elder men are, of his superiority to ordinary mortals—had sauntered, half-laughing, half-disgusted, out of the room. "Something you said the other day has stuck to my memory, Mrs. Crofton—help me out with it, pray. Are we worth a woman's tears, the greater part of us? What is the good of us? I don't mean Bertie, who is doing something in this world, but, for example, such a fellow as me!"

"Take care, Maurice! I see hoofs and a tail upon that humility of yours," said I. "You, who are so wise, do you not know that women and their tears are no more superlative than men and their doings? Did you think I meant the tender, heroical, sentimental tears of romance, for the sake of which the sublime knight might be content to die? No such thing. I meant only that there seems a kind of pathetic, homely justice in it, when the man who dies—especially the man who dies untimely—has a woman belonging to him, to be his true and faithful mour-

ner; that is all—it is nothing superlative; the sublime men are no better loved than the homeliest ones. Alice, if you asked her, would give you the poetical youthful interpretation of it, but I mean no such thing, Maurice. We want no great deeds, we womenkind; we were born to like you, and to cry over you, troublesome creatures that you are!”

“Ah! that is very well,” said Maurice, who in his heart was young enough to like the superlative idea best. “I wish I had a supreme right to somebody’s tears—but why should anybody cry over me? Am not I foredoomed to shrivel up into a College Don?”

“If you please,” said I.

“And if I don’t please?” cried Maurice, starting up, and seizing, after his usual fashion, a book off the table. He made a hurried march about the room, as usual, too; throwing that down; and picking up another to look at its title, then returned, and repeated, with some emphasis—“And what if I don’t please?”

“Why then, please God, you will do something better,” said I; “I hope so sincerely—it will give me the greatest pleasure—but you don’t make any progress by talking of it; that is our woman’s province. *Do, Maurice, do! don’t say!*”

The young man flashed with an angry and

abashed color. "Thank you, I will, if it were to carry a hod. I have not forgotten," he said, with a little bitter meaning, "that I am a widow's son."

"A widow's son should be the prince of sons," said I. "You make me preach, you young people, though it is not my vocation. Carry a hod then, if you will, like a gentleman and a Christian, and I, for one, will bid you God speed."

Maurice put down his book, and came forward to me, holding out his hand. I suspect he liked me, though he had no great reason, and I confess, now-a-days, that I liked him. He held out his hand to say good-bye, and in saying good-bye opened his heart.

"Mrs. Crofton, you preach very well, considering that it is not your vocation; but I begin to think I am coming to that big preacher, Life, whom you once told me of. *He* is not a college don. Do you know," said Maurice, with a frank, confused laugh, and rising color, "I'm in love?"

"I suspected as much," said I. "Is all well?"

"All was ill, what with my own folly, and what with that spiteful little witch at the Rectory," said Maurice; "but it's coming right again. If I were to die to-morrow—little as I deserve them—I believe I should have these woman's tears."

“My dear boy, be thankful, and go home and live!” said I, with the water in my eyes. I was half inclined to kiss, and bless, and cry over him in the foolishness of my heart.

“I will,” said Maurice, in the fulness and effusion of his; and he kissed my hand with a congenial impulse, and went away abruptly, moved beyond speaking. He left me more profoundly and pleasantly touched than I had been for a long time. Perhaps I thought, with natural vanity, that I had a little—just a little—share in it. Dire must be the disappointment, and heavy the calamity, which should shrivel up Maurice Harley now into a college don.

CHAPTER XXII.

ANOTHER long period of home quietness, but great anxiety followed this. Bertie, of course, would not return while the crisis of affairs in India had not yet been determined; and we were so much the more anxious about him, since he had been restored to us, as it seemed, out of the very grave. Later he was seriously wounded, threatened with fever, and really in great danger, but got through that as he had through all the other perils of that murderous Indian war. He distinguished himself, too, to our great pride and delight, especially to the boundless exultation of Derwie, and gained both credit and promotion almost beyond the hopes of so young a man. But, in the meantime, we were both anxious and concerned, for we could not induce him to think that he had encountered his full share of the fighting, and might now, surely, with perfect honor and satisfaction bring his laurels home.

“If the women and the babies are all safe on board the ships,” said Derwie, who was almost

as reluctant to consent to Bertie's return before the fighting was over as Bertie himself.

During all this time I scarcely saw Alice; she avoided coming in my way; when we met, avoided speaking to me—avoided looking in my face when that was practicable—could neither forgive herself for having betrayed her feelings, nor me for having witnessed that betrayal. Altogether her feelings towards me and in my presence were evidently so uncomfortable, that out of mere charity and consideration I no longer visited Mrs. Harley's as I had done, nor invited them to Hilfont. They still came sometimes, but not as they had done before. I began to fear that I had lost Alice, which, to be sure, was unkind of her, considering what very old friends we were; but she could not forget nor forgive either herself or me for those tears out of which she had been cheated over that supposititious grave where Bertie Nugent was not.

So that there occurred an interregnum of information, at least, if not of interest, in respect to the Harleys. Maurice was in London, struggling forward to find what place he could in that perennial battle—struggling not very successfully—for, to the amazement of all, and, above all, to his own, he was not so greatly in advance of other people, when he had done something definite

to be judged by, as the Fellow of Exeter had supposed himself. Providence, in quaint, poetic justice, had deprived Maurice, for example, of that faculty of writing which he had, maybe, esteemed too highly. His admirers had prophesied great triumphs for him in the field of literature before he had tried his pen there; but it turned out that Maurice could not write, and the discovery was rather humiliating to the young man. I have no doubt he made an infinitude of other discoveries equally unpleasant. His Fellowship kept him from starving, but it aggravated his failures and the pain of them, and held up more conspicuously than might have been desired, the unexpected imperfections of "Harley of Exeter," in whom his contemporaries had been disposed to put a great deal of faith. Nevertheless, Maurice held on bravely. I liked him better and better as he found himself out. And he bore the discovery like a man.

As for Johnnie, poor boy, who had, all uneducated and without training as he was, just that gift of putting his mind into words which his brother lacked—he had not yet come to the bitter ending of his boyish dream. He was busy with his second book, in high hope and spirits, thinking himself equally secure of fame and of love. The poor lad had forgotten entirely the

difference between the present time and that past age in which literature, fresh and novel, took its most sovereign place. He thought how Fanny Burney was fêted and applauded for her early novel; he thought of Scott's unrivalled influence and honor; and he forgot that a hundred people write books, and especially write stories, now-a-days, for one who wrote then—and that he himself was only the unconsidered member of a multitudinous tribe, over whose heads Fame soared far away. It was not wonderful—he was scarcely one and twenty yet, though he was an author, and Miss Reredos's slave. He meant to make the lady of his love "glorious with his pen," as Montrose did, and expected to find an equal monarchy in her heart. Poor cripple Johnnie! a sadder or more grievous folly never was.

But it surprised me to find that he, poor fellow, was never the object of his mother's anxiety. She was sorry, with a sort of contempt for his "infatuation," and could not for her life imagine what men could see in that Miss Reredos. Mrs. Harley was a very kind and tender mother, ready at any time to deny herself for any real gratification to her boy; but she did not make much account of his heartbreak, of which "nothing could come." For all practical purposes

Johnnie's love-tale was but a fable—nothing could ever come of it. Anything so unlikely as that Miss Reredos would marry the cripple never entered anybody's mind but his own. And Mrs. Harley accordingly took it calmly, save for a momentary outburst of words now and then against the cause of Johnnie's delusion—that was all. Nothing save the bitter disappointment, the violent mortification, the youthful despair, all augmented and made doubly poignant by the ill health and infirmities of this unfortunate boy, could result from his unlucky love-fever. So his mother was calm, and made no account of that among her many troubled and anxious concerns.

●As for Alice, she was still Mrs. Harley's greatest grievance, though I was not trusted with the same confidences, nor implored to use my influence, as before. Alice was more capricious, more tantalizing, less to be reckoned on than ever. She had, I suppose, dismissed Mr. Reredos with less courtesy than the Rector believed due to him, for he went about his duties with a certain grim sullenness, like an injured man, and never permitted himself to mention her name. I was in the Rector's ill graces, as well as in those of Alice. He could not forgive me any more than she could, for the confidence themselves had

bestowed. It was rather hard upon me to be thus excommunicated for no ill-doings of my own ; but I bore it as best I could, sorry for Mr. Reredos, and not doubting that, some time or other, Alice would come to herself.

It was thus, in our immediate surroundings, that we spent the time until Bertie's return.

CHAPTER XXIII.

It was once more spring when Bertie returned, Spring—Easter—that resurrection time which came to our hearts with a more touching force when we received home into our peaceful house—so pale, so worn out, and yet so sunburnt and scarred with violent labors past—that Bertie, who had gone from us so strong and so bold. He had been repeatedly wounded—had suffered more than once from fever—had felt, at last, that his health was broken, and that there was little more use in him while he remained in India, and so was persuaded to come home. Derwent, kindest of friends, went to meet him at Southampton, and brought him home as tenderly as any nurse, or rather far more tenderly, with a tenderness more considerate and requiring less response than that of a woman. To see our young hero an invalid, overpowered me entirely. I quite broke down under it, comparing him with what he was, and fearing everything from the mortal paleness, thrown by his sunbrowned com-

plexion into a ghastly yellow, which sometimes overspread his face. Derwent judged more justly—he held up his finger to me when he saw the exclamation of dismay and grief that trembled on my lips.

“He’s tired, Clare,” said my husband. “A bright fire, and an English bed and rest—that’s all Bertie wants to-night. He’ll answer all your questions to-morrow. Come, old fellow, you know your way to your old room.”

“I should think so, indeed—and thank God I am at home,” cried Bertie, with his familiar voice. With a thrill of anguish I restrained my salutations and followed quietly to see that all was comfortable for him. He protested that it was nonsense, that he could come downstairs perfectly well, that Mr. Crofton only wanted to humble his vanity; but at the same moment drew up his foot wearily upon the sofa, with a gesture that showed better than words his need of rest.

“Alas, Derwent, has it come to this?” said I, as we went downstairs.

Derwent turned round upon me, put his big hands upon my shoulders, and thrust me in before him to the handiest room. “Now, Clare,” he said, with comical solemnity, “if we are going to have any nonsense or lamentations, I’ll

shut you up here till my patient's better. The boy is as sound as I am, and would be able to ride to cover in a fortnight, if any such chances were going. Now don't say a word—I am speaking simple truth."

"I must trust my own eyes," said I; "but you need not fear my indiscretion. See how I have refrained from agitating him now."

"Agitating him! Oh!" cried Derwent, with a good-humored roar. "What stuff you speak, to be sure! He is quite able to be agitated as much as you please—there is nothing in the world but wounds and fatigue the matter with Bertie. I am afraid you are only a woman after all, Clare; but you're not to interfere with my patient. I've taken him in hand, and mind you, I'm to have the credit, and bring him through."

"But, oh, Derwent," said I, "how pale he is!"

"If I had seen as many dreadful sights as he has, I should be pale too," said Derwent. "Seriously, he is tired and worn out, but not ill. Don't be sorry for him, Clare—don't put anything in his head. Talk pleasantly. I don't forbid the subject, for example," said my husband, looking at me with a certain affectionate cloudy mirth, as if he had known my secret all along, "of Alice Harley, if you choose."

I put him aside a little impatiently, and he

followed me into the very late dinner, which had been deferred for the arrival of the travellers, and where Bertie's empty chair struck me again with a little terror. But I was wise for once, and yielded to Derwent's more cheerful opinion. On the next morning Bertie was better—he went on getting better day by day. Derwent took care of him, and attended him in a way which took me by surprise; never teasing him with questions—never gazing at him with his heart in his eyes, as we womanish creatures do, to mar the work we would give our lives to accomplish; but with his eyes always open, and his attention really missing nothing that happened, and taking account of all.

A week after his arrival, Bertie, who hitherto had been telling me, as he could, his adventures in India—dread adventures, interwoven with all the thread of that murderous history—at last broke all at once into the full tide of home talk.

“And dear old Estcourt, Cousin Clare,” said Bertie, “stands exactly as it was, I suppose; and Miss Austin as steadfast as the lime trees—and the children to keep the old park cheerful—all as it was?”

“All as it was, Bertie; but the other house ready and waiting for you.”

I looked up with a little anxiety to see the

effect of what I said. Distracted with a disappointed love, Bertie had left us—ill and languid he had returned. I thought my words might recall to his mind at once his old dreams and his present weakness; and with some terror I glanced at his face. He was lying on the sofa in that bright morning room with the great bow window, from which, shining afar like a great picture, he could see all the peaceful slope of our low-country, with the river glistening in links and bends, and the cathedral towers far off, lending a graceful centre and conclusion to the scene.

Bertie did not return my glance; he lay still, with a languid ease and satisfaction in his attitude which struck me for the first time—as if he was profoundly content to be there, and felt his fatigues and pains melt away in that warmth of home. As I looked at him a warmer color rose over his brown-pale face, a pleasant glimmer woke in his eye—his whole aspect warmed and brightened—a half conscious smile came playing about his parted lips. Whatever Bertie thought upon, it was neither disappointment nor broken health.

There was a long pause—the silence was pleasant—broken only by the soft domestic sounds of a great house; brightly lay that pleasant land-

scape outside the window, all soft and sweet with spring; tender and pleasant was the contrast of all the scene, the care and love surrounding the soldier now, with the burning plains and cruel contests from which he had come; and thoughts, dear, warm, and tender, arose in Bertie's heart. He paused long, perhaps, with a simple art, to conceal from me a little the link of pleasant association which had directed his thoughts that way—then, with that wavering, conscious smile, spoke—

“So Alice Harley is not married,” he said, turning on his elbow, with a pretence of carelessness, as if to get a fuller view. “How is that, Cousin Clare?”

To think that Alice Harley connected herself instinctively with the idea of Bertie's house which was ready for him, was a pleasant thought to me; but I only answered, “There is no telling, Bertie. She might have been married two or three times had she pleased.”

“I am very glad of it,” said Bertie; “to see every pretty girl whom one used to know converted into the mother of ever so many children, makes a fellow feel old before his time. I am not so frightfully old, after all; but I fear nobody will have anything to say to a worn-out poor soldier like me.”

“Don't be too humble, Bertie,” said I. “I

don't think, between ourselves, that Colonel Nugent is so very diffident of his own merits. On the contrary, he knows he has made a little noise in this world, is aware that people will drink his health, and fête him when he is well enough, and that all the young ladies will smile upon the hero. Don't you think now, honestly, that this is the real state of the case?"

Bertie blushed and fell back to his old position. "Don't be hard upon a fellow, Cousin Clare," he said, with a slightly pleading tone—half afraid of ridicule—half conscious that little ridicule was to be expected from me.

"No indeed, quite the reverse—nobody will be hard upon you, my boy," said I. "Huntingshire is quite ready to bestow anything you wish upon you, Bertie—anything from a seat in Parliament, up to the prettiest daughter it has, if you mean to set up your household gods in the Estcourt jointure-house."

Bertie blushed once more, and coughed, and cleared his throat a little, as if he had some intentions of taking me into his confidence, when my boy Derwie suddenly made a violent diversion by rushing in all red and excited, and flinging himself against our soldier with all his might.

"Bertie!" shouted little Derwent, "is it true you're going to have the Victoria Cross?"

Bertie colored violently as he recovered from

that shock. I don't believe, if he had been suddenly charged with running away, that he would have looked half as much abashed.

"Why, you know, Derwie, we'd all like it if we could get it," he said, faltering slightly; but I knew in a moment, by the sudden movement of his head and glance of his eye, that he really did believe it possible, and that this was the darling ambition of Bertie's heart.

"But Bevan told me!" cried Derwie—"he told me about those gates, you know, that you and the rest blew up. Mamma, listen! There were six of them, forlorn-hope men, Bevan says"—

"Ah, Derwie, hush!—four of them sleep yonder, the brave fellows!—four privates, who could not hope for distinction like me," cried Bertie, with that same profound awe and compunction, contrasting his own deliverance with the calamity of others, which had once stricken me.

"A private can have the Victoria Cross as well as a general," cried Derwie, clapping his hands; "and more likely, Bevan says—for a general commands and doesn't fight."

"That is true—God save the Queen!" cried Bertie. "If Corporal Inglis gets it, Derwie—and he ought—we'll illuminate."

"If you get it," said Derwie, "you deserve it all the same. Mamma, they blew up the gates

with gunpowder; they went close—so close that”——

“Boh!” cried Bertie; “mamma read all about it in the papers. It was nothing particular—it only had to be done, that’s all. Now, Derwie, don’t you know when a thing has to be done somebody must do it?”

“Yes, I know,” said Derwie, “perfectly well. When mamma says *must* I always go directly—don’t I, mamma?—and if I were as big as you I wouldn’t mind being killed either. When you were killed, Bertie—that time you know when everybody thought so—oh, what a crying there was!”

“Was there?” asked Bertie, with a softened tone, putting his arm round the eager child.

But a new point of interest in those human studies which were so dear to him had suddenly seized upon Derwie’s imagination. He turned abruptly to me.

“Mamma, didn’t Alice come once and cry? I saw her go away with such red eyes; and she never came again, and never looked like her own self when she did come,” said my boy, with a courageous disregard of grammar. “What is that for? Wasn’t she glad when Bertie came alive again, and it was only poor Captain Hughes?”

“Hush, Derwie, my boy—you don’t under-

stand these things. I was deeply grieved for that poor Captain Hughes, Bertie—I almost felt as if, in our great anxiety for you, his fall was our fault.”

But Bertie was not thinking of Captain Hughes. He was looking intently at me with that wavering color in his cheeks and an eager question in his eyes. When I spoke, my words recalled him a little, and he put on a grave look, and murmured something about the “poor fellow!” or “brave fellow!” I could not tell which—then looked at me again, eager, with a question hovering on his lips. The question of all others which I was resolute not to answer. So I gathered up my work remorselessly, put it away in my work-table, jingled my keys, told him I would see if the newspaper had come yet, and left the room without looking round. He might find that out at Alice’s own hands if he wished it—he should not receive any clandestine information from me.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE first visit which Bertie was able to make was to the cottage—to see Mrs. Harley, as he said, gravely—but I fear he did not get a very satisfactory reception. He told me he thought Alice greatly changed when he returned; but he was not communicative on the subject, and had a decided inclination to go back again. Perhaps the wavering, pleasant, half-conscious sentiment, and tender youthful reminiscence, with which Bertie came home, was the better of a little opposition to warm it into independent life; and Alice had reason enough for a double share of perversity and caprice, though Bertie knew nothing of that. She had betrayed herself to me, and, for a moment, to Maurice. She thought, no doubt, that everybody had suspected that secret of hers—and with unconscious self-importance, that it was whispered throughout the country with secret smiles over all her former unmarried-woman superiority to vulgar love-affairs. Her credit was consequently very deeply

involved—she would not have smiled upon Bertie Nugent now had it been to save his life.

Still, however, Bertie, in the pleasant leisure of his convalescence, betook himself to Mrs. Harley's cottage; and came home talking of Johnnie and little Kate, and the letters from Maurice—but very little about Alice, save chance words now and then, which showed a singularly close observation of her habits. Sometimes he asked me puzzled questions about those opinions of hers. Bertie, though he had been cheated once, was not contemptuous of womenkind. He did not understand these new views about the vulgarity of being married, and the propriety of multiplying female occupations. I suspect he entertained the natural delusion that, while he himself stood there, most ready and anxious to share with her the common course of life, private projects of her own, which turned her aside from that primitive and ancient occupation of wife, were a little fantastical, and extremely perplexing. But Bertie was not like Mr. Reredos—he wanted simply to be at the bottom of it, and find out what she meant. He was not the man to worry any woman into marrying him, or to lay insidious siege to her friends. Ancient kindness, a lingering recollection of her youthful sweetness and beauty, which had come softly back to

Bertie after his early love-troubles, and which had been kept alive by the fascination of a secret delicious wonder, whether, perhaps, *he* might have anything to do with the fact of her remaining unmarried, had combined to direct Bertie's thoughts towards Alice, and to connect her image with all the plans and intentions of his return home. In short, the feeling upon both sides was very much alike—with both it was a certain captivating imaginary link, far more subtle and sweet than an understood engagement, which warmed their hearts to each other. But for those tragical possibilities which had so deeply excited Alice, all would have gone as smoothly as possible when our hero came home. Now the obstacles on each side were great. On Alice's, that dread idea of having betrayed a secret, unsought, unreturned affection for the distant soldier, along with the lesser but still poignant remembrance of Lady Greenfield's malicious report that Bertie himself had expected Cousin Clare to have somebody in her pocket for him to marry. On Bertie's part, the equally dangerous chance that, deeply mortified by finding his hope of having some share in her thoughts so entirely unfounded, as it appeared, he might turn away sorrowfully from the theories which influenced her, but which his simple intelligence did not comprehend.

Never matchmaker was more perplexed than I was between these two; I dared not say a word to either—I looked on, trembling, at the untoward course of affairs. It was Bertie who disappointed me once; for all I could see, it was most likely to be Alice now.

When we began—which was not till another autumn restored us to Hilfont—to be able to give some entertainments to our country neighbors, in honor of our soldier, Alice, most cleverly and cunningly avoided coming. She had always some admirable excuse—some excuse so unquestionable that it would have been quite cruel to have grumbled at it. I do not think she had been once within our house since Bertie returned. She sent me her love, and the most dutiful messages. She was so sorry, but she was sure her dear Mrs. Crofton would not be displeased when she knew. I was displeased, however, and had hard ado with myself to keep from saying as much, and declaring my conviction that she was very unkind to Bertie. I daresay I might have done so with advantage, though prudence and the fear of something coming of it, restrained me—for the idea of being unkind to Bertie would, doubtless, have been balm to Alice's soul.

They met, however, though she would not come to Hilfont—Clara Sedgwick, who was as

bold to give Bertie welcome as she had been to weep her free sisterly tears, which there was no need to conceal, over his supposed grave, arranged one of her very largest and grandest dinner-parties for Bertie as soon as it was practicable. Everybody was there—Lady Greenfield and her husband, who had all at once grown an old man, his wife having stopped his fox-hunting long ago—and Miss Polly, and all the Croftons, far and near, and such Nugents as could be picked up handily; and finally, all the great people of the county, to glorify our hero. I cannot tell by what ingenious process of badgering Alice had been driven out of her retirement, and produced that night in the Waterflag drawing-room. I will not even guess what cruel sisterly sarcasms and suggestions of what people might say, had supplemented the sisterly coaxing which were, no doubt, ineffectual; but there Alice was—there she stood by the side of Clara's dazzling toilette and rosy tints, pale and clouded, in her brown silk dress—her *old* brown silk dress, made in a fashion which “went out” at least three years ago; without a single ornament about her anywhere—her hair braided as plainly as though she had just come down-stairs to make the tea, and superintend the breakfast table—not even the pretty bouquet of delicate flowers at her breast,

which made so pretty a substitute for jewels on little Kate's white dress—not a bracelet nor a ring—nothing to diversify the entire plainness of her appearance, nor a single sparkle or gleam of reflection on neck, finger, or arm. I confess that I was both annoyed and disappointed. Instead of doing her womanly utmost to look well and young, as became her, Alice had exhausted all her perverse pains in making a dowdy of herself. I cannot say she had succeeded. It was the crisis of her life, and mind and heart were alike full of movement and agitation. She could not prevent the excitement of her circumstances from playing about her with a gleaming fitful light, which made her expressive face wonderfully attractive. She could not but betray, in despite of her cold, unadorned appearance, and the almost prim reserve which she affected, the tumult and contest within her—extreme emotion, so restrained that the effort of self-control gave a look of power and command to her face, and somehow elevated and dilated her entire figure, and so contradictory that it flashed a hundred different meanings in a moment out of those eyes which were defiant, sarcastic, tender, and proud, all in a glance. I am not sure even that her plain dress did not defeat its purpose still more palpably; it distinguished her, singularly enough,

from other people—it directed everybody's attention to her—it suggested reasons for that prim and peculiar attire—all which, if Alice had guessed them, would have thrown her into an agony of shame.

Miss Reredos was also one of Clara's great party—much against little Mrs. Sedgwick's will—only because it could not be helped, Mrs. Harley being still pertinacious in favor of the Rector, who had all but given up his own cause. And we were still engaged in the mysteries of dinner, and there still remained all the long evening to operate in, when I perceived that this indefatigable young lady had seriously devoted herself to the entertainment of Bertie. He was doing his best to be polite, the good fellow; but it was a long time before he could be warmed into a flirtation. At last some very decided slight from Alice irritated my poor soldier. He turned to the play beside him, and began to amuse himself with it as so many other men had done. Thanks to Miss Reredos, it speedily became a notable flirtation, witnessed and observed by all the party. Alice watched it with a gradual elevation of her head, paling of her cheeks, and look of lofty silent indignation, which was infinitely edifying to me. What had she to do with it?—she who would not bestow a single glance upon Colonel

Nugent—who called him perpetually by that ceremonious name—who was blind and deaf to all his deprecating looks and allusions to youthful days. If he should flirt or even fall in love with and marry Miss Reredos, what was that to Alice? But, to be sure, most likely that indignation of hers was all for Johnnie's sake.

Poor Johnnie! He sat glaring at Bertie with furious eyes. Johnnie's little bit of bookish distinction disappeared and sank to nothing in presence of Bertie's epaulettes. Nobody felt the least interest to-day in Mrs. Harley's clever cripple-boy. His Laura indeed had kept him in life, when she first arrived, by some morsels of kindness, but Laura too had gone over to the enemy. Laura was visibly disposed to charm into her own train that troublesome interloper, and Johnnie, who had resented and forgiven fifty violent flirtations of his lady-love since he himself first found new life, as he said, in her eyes, was more bitterly resentful of this defection than he had been of any previous one. If she and the other culprit, Bertie, could have been consumed by looks, we should have had only two little heaps of ashes to clear away from the Sedgwick's dinner-table that day in place of those two unfortunate people; but Miss Reredos was happily non-combustible. She swept away in all the ful-

ness of crinoline when the inevitable moment came and we womenkind were dismissed, insulting her unhappy young lover by a little nod and smile addressed to him across the table, which would have been delicious an hour ago, but was wormwood and bitterness now. Bertie, I think, at the same moment caught Alice's lofty, offended, indignant glance, and brightened to see the quiet resentment in that perverse young woman's face. It had all the effect of sunshine upon our soldier. At that crisis we left affairs, when we went to the drawing-room. I confess I don't share the often-expressed sentiment about the dulness and absurdity of that little after-dinner interval. The young ladies and the young gentlemen may not like it, perhaps, but when could we maturer womenkind snatch a comfortable moment for that dear domestic talk which you superior people call gossip, if it were not in the pleasant relaxation of this interregnum, when the other creatures are comfortably disposed of downstairs? But for once in my life, being profoundly interested in the present little drama—there is always one at least going on in a great house in the country full of visitors—I did long that day for the coming of the gentlemen, or of Bertie, at least, the hero at once of the situation and of the day.

The first to come upstairs was Johnnie Harley. For some time past he had rather affected, as a manly practice, the habit of sitting to the last after dinner. This day he was burning to discharge the fulness of his wrath upon Miss Reredos, so he lost no time, anxious to be beforehand with his new rival. Miss Reredos had already posed herself at a table, covered with a wealth of prints and photographs, these sentimental amusements being much in her way.

"I have come to have my turn," said Johnnie, savagely. I was seated within hearing, and, I confess, felt no very strong inducement to withdraw from my position. Perhaps Johnnie did not see me—Miss Reredos did, and certainly did not care. "I am come to have my turn, and to tell you that I can't be content to take turns—especially with that empty fellow Nugent, whom you seem, like all the rest, to have taken so great a fancy to."

"Colonel Nugent is not an empty fellow—he is a very agreeable man," said Miss Reredos, calmly.

"Oh! and I am not, I suppose?" cried the reckless and embittered boy.

"You certainly are not always agreeable," answered poor Johnnie's false love, quite blandly; "and as for being a *man* at all—— We have

really had quite enough of this, thank you, Master Harley. One tires of these scenes—they don't answer when they are repeated every day."

"No—not when there is better sport going!" cried poor Johnnie. "I see it all now—you have only been making game of me all the time."

"Did you ever suppose anything else?" asked the witch coldly. I think it must have been Johnnie's transport of passion which made the floor thrill, as I felt under my chair. I heard a furious muttered exclamation—then a long pause. The passion changed, and a great sob came out of Johnnie's boyish heart.

"You don't mean what you say—Laura, Laura!" groaned the poor lad. I could have — well, to be sure I am only a vindictive woman, as women are. I don't know what I could not have done to her, sitting calm and self-satisfied there.

"It is quite time this should be over," said the virtuous Miss Reredos; "I was not making game of you; but I certainly was amusing myself, as I thought you were doing, also. Why, I am three or four years older than you—you silly boy!—don't you know?"

She might have said five or six years, which would have been nearer the truth, but it mattered nothing to Johnnie.

"I could be as good a man as *him* for your sake," he cried, with a gasp. Miss Reredos only played with the fan which dangled from her wrist.

"Say you did not mean it, Laura," whispered the unfortunate boy again.

But Laura shook her head.

"No, no—it has gone quite far enough. Oh! I'm not angry—but, dear, dear, don't you see it's no use. You are a great deal—at least you are younger than I am—and we have nothing, neither of us—and besides" ——

"Besides I am a cripple, and you don't love me!" cried Johnnie, wildly.

"I can't contradict it," said Circe with a toss of her head.

Another fierce exclamation, a hurried dash across the room, a wondering little scream from Clara, across whose ample skirts her brother plunged, as he rushed half frantic away, ended this episode. Clara rose up, startled and nervous, to look after him—and I had to restrain myself from the same impulse; but Circe sat calm among her photographs, and made no sign. After a few moments' interval Clara went tremulously after him. I could only settle myself on my chair again. The poor cripple boy—tenderest and merriest of the flock—whom all the rest had

guarded so jealously!—they could do nothing for him now. He, too, like all the rest of us, had his burden to bear alone.

But I sat on thorns, fearing to see Bertie, when he came upstairs, resume his flirtation with “that witch from the Rectory,” whom Maurice had so truly named. He did not, to my great satisfaction—but remained very quiet, refusing, great lion as he was, to roar—and looking as plaintive and pathetic as it was possible for Bertie’s honest face, unused to simulation of any kind, to look. I fancy the poor fellow imagined—a forlorn hope of that good, simple mind of his, which certainly was not original in its expedients—that Alice might possibly be influenced more favorably by his pitiful looks.

Seeing this, I undertook a little management of that very refractory young person myself.

“Alice, you will come to Hilfont on my birthday, as you have always done—won’t you?—that will be in a fortnight,” said I.

“If you please, Mrs. Crofton,” said Alice, very demurely.

“You know I please; but I don’t please that you should promise, and then send me such a clever, pretty, reasonable excuse when the time comes, that I cannot say a word against it, but only feel secretly that it is very unkind.”

“Unkind! to *you*, Mrs. Crofton!” cried Alice, with a little blush and start.

“To me—who else?—it is for *my* birthday that I ask you to come,” said I, with an artful pretense of feeling offended; “but really, if you treat me as you have done before, I shall be disposed to believe there is *some reason* why you refuse so steadily to come.”

“You may be quite sure I will not stay away,” said Alice, with great state.

She sat by me for half an hour longer, but we did not exchange a dozen words. She said “nothing to nobody” all the remainder of the evening; she looked just a little cross as well, if the truth must be told.

CHAPTER XXV.

A FORTNIGHT after came my birthday, and a family festival.

Mr. Crofton was greatly given to keeping birthdays; he was not a man to be daunted by that coldest and vulgarest commonplace, which warns us with lugubrious mock solemnity that these birthdays are hastening us to the grave. The grave out of which our Lord rose was no devouring, irresponsible monster to Derwent—it was a Christian institution, blessed and hallowed by Him who triumphed over it. So he kept his birthdays with thanks and a celebration of love; and I was well content in this, as in many another kind suggestion of his genial nature, that my husband should have his way.

Bertie was to leave us shortly after, to look after the fitting up of his own house—the Estcourt jointure-house, which he was to occupy during my lifetime. It was a very sufficient, comfortable house, and he was to fit it up according to his own taste. But he was very slow

to talk of his intentions. Any suggestions which I made to him on the subject he received in silence, or with a confused assent. Good Bertie!—he meant that somebody else should decide these questions for him; and somebody else was so perverse, so unaccountable, so unsatisfactory. He sighed, and held his peace.

Johnnie Harley wandered off from Waterflag that night, after his explanation with Miss Reredos. For a week the unfortunate lad was not heard of, and the family spent that interval in the wildest anxiety, making every kind of search after him, from Maurice's hunt through London, whither they thought it likely he would go, to fruitless dragging in the pretty Est river, which mudded its pleasant pools, but fortunately had no other result. At the end of a week he came home—where he had been he never would tell. He returned ill, remorseful, and penitent, with all his little money gone, and his watch—his father's watch—a catastrophe which quite completed Mrs. Harley's misery. Renewed and increased ill health followed this sad escapade of poor Johnnie; but the boy was happy in his unhappiness—nothing could part from him that all-forgiving home-love which forgot every fault of the poor cripple boy.

And in that fortnight Bertie made a brief

journey to London—a journey which thrilled the whole household with the highest excitement, and warmed every individual in it with a touch of the reflected glory. Bertie was *decoré* when he returned; but no, there is no French word in existence which deserves to be used in connection with that supremest badge of modern chivalry, which our boy, with a modest and shame-faced delight, impossible to describe in words, received from his Queen.

Bertie wore his prize with a swelling breast, but an abashed cheek; indeed, he did not wear it at all, reserving it for his private triumph, and, as I supposed, for my birthday feast. But our hero had something else in his mind.

The day came at last, and at last, most earnestly looked for, in a carriage filled with the Sedgwick children, and, I believe, all the flowers in Clara's conservatory, and all that could be come by honestly or dishonestly within ten miles of country—Alice Harley made her appearance. To show emphatically how much I was mistaken in supposing that *any reason* could keep her away from Hilfont when her dear Mrs. Crofton wished her to be there, Alice with rash temerity had volunteered to take charge of the children, and come with them early and alone. In the same spirit she had actually taken a little

trouble with her dress, which was new, full, soft, and delicate—if not white, as nearly so as Alice's conscience and profound conviction of her grave years could permit it to be. She was on her defence, but not exactly defiant as yet—a little melted in spite of herself by sundry associations of the place and time—by good news from Maurice, which she whispered in my ear, news of an appointment which her brother had got after much exertion, and which would enable him to marry; and perhaps a little by the honor which she knew her “old playfellow” had come to. I saw her cast a momentary but somewhat eager look at Bertie's breast when she saw him first, but to my disappointment, as to hers, his decoration was not there.

And then Alice had a present for me. I had by me a little present to be given to her on the same occasion—an old ornament of my own, which I thought, for that reason at least, the prim Alice might perhaps be induced to wear. The children had gone away with their attendants, to be extricated out of the many wrappings in which their mother's care had enveloped them. Only Derwie stayed with us in the breakfast-room; the child was extremely anxious about these two, I could not tell why. Some unconscious link of association, or acute childish observa-

tion, connected them in little Derwent's mind. He stood by my side on pretence of waiting till Clary and the rest were ready, but I believe in my heart from sheer curiosity and interest in these affairs of life and humanity which were so deeply attractive to my son.

Alice was seated near the great window, her pretty figure visible against the light, looking fresher and more youthful than she had done for a long time, and the soft breadth of landscape without, making a pleasant background to the picture. A little more in the shade stood Bertie, and Derwie and I were opposite Alice, with a little table between us, all full in the light of the large bow-window, from which all curtains and obscuring influences—such was my husband's cheerful pleasure—were always drawn as much back as possible. My present to Alice was a little gold chain for the neck. I like that fashion of ornament. This one was long enough to encircle that pretty throat twice, or to hang loose upon her breast if she pleased. I said it wanted a pendant, as I threw it loosely round her neck.

Alice had been a little nervous and tremulous before; this made her rather more so—she kissed me in a trembling, breathless way. She could not help feeling conscious of that shadow behind her, and of a certain want of air and cloud

which betokened a crisis. She knew something was coming, and faltered—it was quite a secret, close, appealing touch which her arms gave me for the moment. Alice was afraid. When she sat down again she played with the clasp of the chain and unloosed it, and continued so, unconsciously dangling that loose end in her hand.

“It should have a heart at it, mamma—like Clary’s,” said little Derwent.

“Yes,” said I, “certainly it wants a pendant—a locket—or, as Derwie says, a heart, or a cross, or ——”

“For once let me supply what it wants,” said Bertie, suddenly starting forward with one of those long, noiseless steps which people only make when they are almost past speaking. He took the end of the chain from Alice’s fingers, slid his own matchless decoration on it, clasped it, let it fall. “Heart and Cross!” said Bertie, breathless with feelings he could not speak. Alice had not looked up—did not see what it was, so rapidly was all done, till it lay dark upon the white bosom of her dress, moving with the palpitations of her heart—cold, ugly, glorious—a gift far beyond all Bertie’s fortune—more precious to him than his life.

She gazed at it astonished for a moment, then glanced round at us all with an amazed, inquir-

ing glance—then faltering, and making the utmost efforts to control herself, took it in her hands, put it to her lips, and burst into an irrestrainable passion of tears.

Little Derwie and I, like sensible people, took each other's hands, and marched away.

Alice did not wear her hero's cross that night to her chain. He wore it himself, as was fit—but it did not much matter. She had taken the other invaluable and invisible appendage which Bertie offered with his glorious badge—had consented to be solemnly endowed with all his worldly goods, cross and heart included, and humbly put her chain round her neck without any pendant, in token of the unwilling bondage to which she had yielded at last.

So ended, after eight years of disappointment, and *that* early love-affair, which Colonel Bertie had long ago forgotten, my solitary enterprise in match-making. Let nobody despair. I am secure now that Estcourt shall have no alien mistress, and that all Huntingshire will not hold a happier household than that of Bertie Nugent, my heir, who has already added the highest distinction of modern chivalry to the name of his fathers and mine.